the throne we die for

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/60910441.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	방탄소년단 | Bangtan Boys | BTS
Relationship:	Jeon Jungkook/Park Jimin
Characters:	Jeon Jungkook, Park Jimin (BTS)
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Royalty, Alternate Universe - Medieval, Rape/Non-con Elements, Blood and Violence, Dead Dove: Do Not Eat, Alpha Jeon Jungkook, Omega Park Jimin (BTS), Top Jeon Jungkook, Bottom Park Jimin (BTS), Mating Rituals, Worldbuilding, Enemies to Lovers, Angst with a Happy Ending, Unresolved Sexual Tension, Public Sex, Mpreg, Possessive Jeon Jungkook, plot exists only to make the smut smuttier don't be questioning things, Oral Sex, Lotsa sex
Language:	English
Collections:	jikook secret santa 2024
Stats:	Published: 2024-12-25 Words: 40,300 Chapters: 1/1

the throne we die for

by abuden

Summary

When Prince Jimin is forced to mate to save his people, his mother warns him he must never feel pleasure for the bastard king.

Notes

i'm recommending this music to go with the fic, especially for the later scenes.

See the end of the work for more notes

1.

Light slowly ebbed, pooling in the castle's corners like a receding tide. The towering walls were weighed down by dread and royal banners sagged to a lifeless wind.

In the sun room, Jimin braided his queen mother's hair.

His fingers were deft, weaving greying strands with the practiced ease of countless repetitions. But his mind was elsewhere—on the unending horizon, on the sea his father had taken to, on the walls left unguarded by men who would never return.

"Mother," he called gently. "Is there truly no one left to call for aid?"

"Your father took the last of our allies with him to fight the enemy." Her jaw clenched briefly, but her gaze was unmoving, fixed on something unseen beyond the stone walls. "And now the Jeon bastard approaches with vengeance. They say his army of outcasts and criminals has grown—men who'd rather see the kingdom burn than bow."

"But deserters are punished. How can they not fear death?" Jimin asked.

His mother scoffed. "Do you think a brute like him cares? This isn't about laws or loyalty. He's killed your uncles, aunts, cousins, all whose blood is bound to ours. To him, we're nothing but pigs to be slaughtered."

Jimin felt his stomach knot, his mind churning. He hadn't left the castle since he was a boy. Even then, his farthest reach had been the Twin Rivers, where he once met an uncle and perhaps a grandfather. But their faces had long since blurred into distant memories, and he felt little for relatives he could hardly picture. The cold edge in his mother's voice, however, struck him deeper than anything else.

He had never known hunger, nor the chill of fear that came with battle or loss. To him his mother would say, *You don't need to concern yourself with worldly matters. As the only omega prince of this royal family, your worth is in your birthright*. And so he had stayed, safe and untouched by the turmoil of the outside world. He didn't know what to make of Jeon Jungkook's rebellion, nor could he imagine how he might survive it.

"Well," he said softly, seeking reassurance from the one truth he knew. "The king did well to kill the Jeons. They were traitors."

Her shoulders tensed, their sloping lines drawn taut. "And now their bastard son comes to finish the reckoning."

Jimin tied off the end of his mother's braid and went around her to sit by her side, clasping her bony fingers in her lap. She felt frail and brittle.

What would he do without her?

The thought of Jeon Jungkook storming their gates made his blood run cold. He tried not to think of the whispers, but they were everywhere now. The northern chief's alpha bastard, exiled and forgotten, turned into a weapon of wrath. In only a month, his name had become a force of myth. Once, he'd been just a shadow among watchmen, stripped of his house and name and sent to guard the borders far north. But that was before Jimin's father had struck down his family. Before he declared them traitors and left their bodies for the vultures.

Now, stories of Jeon Jungkook's mutiny spread like wildfire, of castles overrun, villages reduced to char, walls painted with blood and flame. They said he was no mere alpha, but a storm on foot, driven by fury and grief. With each victorious battle, he took everything—land, titles, lives—as if he meant to erase the kingdom from its very foundation.

The evening sky darkened with thick clouds that clung to the castle walls. Jimin could hear the distant clamour of swords, the sharp echo of shouted orders.

Then the door creaked open and his eldest brother entered. The shoulders that Jimin used to climb as a child now carried the weight of an impossible task. His once handsome face was lined with fatigue and aged by grim resolve. Jimin ached for him. Such was their last line of defence. War was never a scholar's game but his brother was forced to play it.

"He's here," Seokjin said. "The bastard son marches at our gates."

Jimin's heart stilled. It felt like the end of all things. He didn't think the alpha could make it so near, even as the castle prepared for the worst. All he could hear was the steady pulse of his own fear, thrumming like a death knell in his chest.

He rose to his feet and held onto his mother's arm.

"Take courage, Mother. Father used to say these walls had survived the breath of dragons."

"Father is dead," Seokjin announced sharply. "As is our brother."

Jimin's hand fell away. The room spun briefly, and he could do nothing but stare at his brother's face. It was as if the air had turned to stone, pressing heavy against his chest. Grief filled the void where his breath should have been.

His mother erupted in a single wrenching sob which she quickly swallowed. "May the Gods guide their souls. We're all that's left now. We must not give him the satisfaction of seeing us break."

Jimin's throat burned as he spoke. "Then what shall we do?"

"We hold," Seokjin said. "For as long as these walls let us, we hold. Those were Father's instructions."

"But against him? What hope do we have against a man of such violence?"

His mother turned to him, her eyes hardened, almost fierce. "We have ourselves," she said. "We have our name, our blood. Even if it's the end, we meet it as those before us did—with pride. By starlight, we endure."

2.

They gathered in the council room.

For the first time, Jimin found himself inside of it, rather than abandoned on the other side of the doors. It felt strange to be here, within the heart of his family's authority. It had long since been drilled into him that an omega was never meant to bear the harsh brunt of politics. This room, as a result, was reserved for those with the power to shape the kingdom's fate, and not him.

The walls were draped with ancient tapestries. Their faded threads told tales of a time when his family's strength was unrivalled. The oakwood table in the centre of the room rose to his chest, its surface scarred by decades of deliberation. Twelve chairs encircled it, each placed with perfect symmetry.

Voices overlapped, tones grew biting. Jimin sat back, the ache in his chest dull and relentless. He watched his mother and Seokjin defy every suggestion of retreat with a fire that only loss could forge.

"To surrender would be a disgrace," Seokjin argued.

"A disgrace, yes," one of the advisors countered swiftly. His clothes were rumpled, and his snow-white hair was tousled, as if he'd tumbled out of bed in a hurry. "—but survival is at stake. The bastard boy has torn through every defence before this. He doesn't hold to any code of war. He won't spare us if he breaks these walls."

Another advisor interjected. "He's unrelenting, driven by fury alone. We're not prepared for this force. We're discussing survival, Seokjin, not pride."

"My *son* is the sole heir to his father, Lord Soo." Jimin's mother slammed her hand down. "You will address him not by his name but his title."

Lord Soo instantly dipped his balding head in fluster. "Apologies, my queen. It's just… the prince's strategy seems—"

"Seems what? Reckless? Or is it that the idea of defending our own home frightens you?"

Lord Soo's voice wavered. "Not frightened, my queen… just cautious."

The queen's brows knitted together. "I've yet to see a bastard boy dictate the fate of this house. Are we really so cowed by a deserter with a cock barely grown?"

"Deserter or not, he's slain men twice his age!" Jimin's uncle snapped, his face reddening. "The king is dead. Your son is dead. He's unstoppable. We're not asking for surrender. We're asking for a choice between survival and ruin."

Seokjin's eyes blazed as he paced the old floorboards. "Enough! We're not bending to the whims of a traitor's spawn. We'll defend the castle until our last breath."

Jimin glanced at his mother. Her composure was absolute, her lips pressed into a stern line, her eyes scanning the grave faces of the council members.

“Is this what we’ve come to?” she asked coldly. “Trembling at the thought of a boy who will never be fit to inherit? I will not see my sons cower before a threat born out of a petty grudge. Let him come.”

“Then, Your Majesty—” A younger advisor hesitated. “Perhaps a parley? A temporary delay, if nothing else. We could buy time to gather allies—call for reinforcements.”

“And what do you propose we offer him, councilman?” Seokjin blurted. “Land? Wealth? A promise to share our rule? Or do you suggest we invite him into our gates and ask him politely to spare us?”

“Should we not weigh the lives of everyone under this roof? We must consider alternatives, if only for their sake.”

“And I *have* considered those lives, councilman,” the queen declared. “But tell me, what do we stand to gain by yielding now? A fleeting mercy from a vengeful army? Or only a delayed slaughter?”

Lord Soo gathered his robes in his fist, his knuckles turning white. “My queen, we all respect your resolve, and that of the prince. But we’ve seen what the betrayer and his forces are capable of. His tactics are ruthless, and he’s left no survivors in his path. This might be our only chance to negotiate.”

Seokjin shook his head. “A negotiation is out of the question. He’s already stained his hands with the blood of our own. I won’t dignify a man like that with words.”

The younger advisor pressed, almost pleading. “Then at least a delay, Prince Seokjin. Enough time to reach out to allies, to fortify—”

“Our walls are strong, our men willing to fight. You speak of ruin, councilman, but it is ruin we invite if we give in now.” The queen paused. “The choice is made.”

Uneasy murmurs rippled through the room, the councilmen casting furtive glances at one another. Yet none dared defy her openly. She was the queen, and Seokjin, their heir. With the two highest authorities firmly aligned, their path was set—and by extension, so was Jimin’s.

3.

They held as long as nightfall. Torches lit up the night sky and drums sounded like thunder. The battle outside was quick and brutal. Jungkook's army cheered when they breached the gates. Wood splintered and iron bent. Within moments, the front doors crashed to the ground and screams flooded the corridors, sharp and discordant like a broken melody.

Inside, it was carnage.

Hidden behind a ring of guards, Jimin watched from the upper gallery. The sour stench of sweat and blood lodged into his nostrils, the metallic bite of iron sharp against his tongue. His stomach swooped, his limbs were locked. He couldn't move, though every nerve, every fragment of his being urged him to run.

The clash of metal, the gurgle of blood spilling on the floor, the sickening thud of bodies falling in heaps. Jimin flinched at every sound. The soldiers of his family, armed with swords and knives, jagged wood and a butcher's axe, all hacked into minced meat in front of his eyes. It seemed impossible, that although they fought with everything they had, they were no match for the invading army.

Jungkook's men attacked in a mass of black fur. They were tall and broad, their muscles rippling beneath coarse hide, arms thick as tree trunks. The air around them reeked of raw meat. They moved like shadows made flesh. And parting through the murderers strode the bastard boy himself.

Jeon Jungkook was nothing like Jimin expected.

He was no boy, but a man far older than Jimin, whose body carried the weight of years lived and fought for. His hair fell in dark, loose waves, wild and unkempt, framing a face sharper and harder than anything Jimin could have imagined. His eyes held the chill of winter, his skin streaked with grime and blood, his chest rising and falling with each steady breath.

The alpha's eyes swept over the vicinity and for a fleeting second, they landed on Jimin.

Jimin's heart seized, caught between terror and a strange, inexplicable pull. In that gaze, he felt himself shrink. He was small, exposed, nothing more than a pawn beneath the stare of someone who could hack man and boy like chopped wood.

Just as quickly, he turned away, his focus snapping back to the fight. With a roar, Jungkook charged into the fray, barrelling into a line of swords and somehow emerging unscathed. Shreds of flesh clung to his teeth, his hands slick with blood. His eyes glowed with a fierce red gleam, his nails twisted into claws that ripped and tore. He lunged at a soldier, thrusting his hand straight through armour, sinew, and bone, wrenching the man's insides free in a single, brutal twist. Jimin clamped a trembling hand over his mouth. Bile churned in his stomach as he watched.

Jungkook moved like a beast set loose, ploughing through the last of those foolish enough to stand in his way. Screams filled the hall as bodies piled, the knights faltering in the face of

such monstrous power. They held as best as they could, forming small groups, backs pressed together. One of the knights shouted orders, urging others forward. But then Jungkook was on him, wrenching the blade from his hand and sinking his claws into the knight's throat.

Everywhere Jimin looked, bodies lay scattered and trampled underfoot. He saw a man clutching the bloody stump of his arm, stumbling back with wide, terror-stricken eyes. In that single, desperate look, Jimin saw his own fear mirrored, a kind of final, dreadful understanding.

The battle was already lost.

Through the smoke and screams, Jeon Jungkook had swept through his home and left it broken beyond repair.

Then, at last, it happened. One by one, the knights began to drop their weapons. Spears fell, swords clattered to the ground, and men sank to their knees, hands raised in surrender. The alpha stilled, his chest heaving as he surveyed the battlefield. And with a simple nod, he commanded his soldiers to take control. His whispers trailed along the shattered walls, curling like smoke around his men's legs as they moved swiftly to obey.

Rough hands grabbed at Jimin, pushing him forward. His breaths came in shallow, panicked bursts. He was sucked into the mass. His neck craned, his thoughts spiralled. Where were they? Where was his mother? His brother?

He couldn't see past the wreckage, the broken bodies, the open wounds, the blood-soaked floor. Fear clawed at his throat.

The path descended, colder and darker, into the dank cells below.

4.

With a sickening jolt, Jimin realised that he might have seen the man who killed his father, his brother. Or maybe it was Jungkook himself. Perhaps in his relentless fury, the alpha had taken them both. It was possible that even his mother and Seokjin had met the same fate.

He swallowed hard, forcing back a sob. The chill of the underground bit through his thin tunic and numbed his skin. He wrapped his arms around his knees, pulling them close in a desperate attempt to find some warmth. The dungeon was stifling and dark and packed with bodies, the air swelling with a fetid stench. Chains clinked softly, and low, hopeless murmurs filled the cell, closing in on Jimin like the walls around him.

He kept his eyes down, avoiding the bruised, hollowed faces of the other prisoners crushed up against him. He didn't want to know them, didn't want to see the hopelessness mirrored in their eyes.

Faint voices echoed down the passageway, growing louder with each step. The steady thud of boots on stone felt like death itself approaching. The cell door groaned open and a guard barked, "Where's the queen?"

Jimin's body moved on instinct, scrambling forward to press his face between the bars. His eyes searched the dim corridor until he spotted her. Her dignity remained intact, even in chains. The guard unlocked her cell, yanked open the gate, and pulled her forward. She stumbled but righted herself quickly.

"Mother!" Jimin called.

She seemed to him as if they stood in her chambers instead of this dark pit. "By starlight, we endure," she said calmly. "Remember who you are."

"Mother, don't—" His voice cracked as he stretched his hand through the bars. The guard gave her another rough tug and pulled her into the shadows.

"Jimin!"

Jimin's eyes darted back to the cell his mother had left. Seokjin's ashen face pressed to the bars. "Are you alright?"

"I… yes," Jimin stammered, swallowing the lump in his throat. "Are you?"

"Listen to me, Jimin. We'll get out of this. We'll find a way. Just—stay strong."

"They've taken Mother," Jimin cried. "Where… where are they going?"

"Likely to the Jungkook boy."

Jimin jerked his head around, squinting to catch a glimpse of the person who'd spoken. "But why?"

“Power,” the man spat out. “Nothing strokes a little boy’s ego like seeing his enemies dragged out in chains. The queen’s an apt first.”

“Jimin,” Seokjin murmured. His eyes softened, looking at Jimin through the bars. “We’ll get through this. Whatever happens. We still have each other.”

Jimin forced himself to nod, feeling the words trying to reach him through the fog in his head. But before he could reply, another soldier arrived and opened Seokjin’s cell. Then he hauled him out as carelessly one might lug a sack of potatoes.

“Seokjin—” Jimin yelled, the tendons in his neck straining. “Brother—no—please—”

Seokjin stumbled, glancing back. “All will be well, Jimin. Just wait. Wait for me, for Mother —” His assurance, so thin and desperate, was quickly snuffed as he disappeared down the passageway.

Jimin sagged back, leaning against the rough, wet stone. He tried to gather himself as his pulse roared in his ears. He pressed against the wall, listening hard, hoping to catch any sound, anything to tell him what was happening above. But the thick, suffocating stone offered nothing.

He let his gaze drift, almost numbly, to where a few men slumped in the shadows. Their faces were marred by bruises and cuts, some of their bodies horribly twisted, wounds glistening and raw. One man gasped for breath. It was a weak, rasping sound. Blood trickled from his mouth. The sight turned Jimin’s stomach, and he backed into his corner, drawing his knees up.

The minutes crawled by, stretching thin and taut. He waited and waited, each heartbeat amplifying his terror until he felt like it might consume him whole.

And then he heard a scream. It was a sound that was sharp and fierce and trembling with agony. A wailing sound that could only belong to his mother.

He scrambled to his feet, gripping the bars with bruising force, his voice breaking as he shouted, “No! Let me out! I demand this—let me out! You can’t do this!”

His cries dissolved into the dark, until footsteps sounded again. A young soldier appeared at his cell door, his face blank. He unlocked the door and gestured out.

“As you wish, Your Highness,” he said.

Jimin felt his every nerve ignite as he took an unsure step back.

“It’s your turn to meet the new king.”

5.

Nothing could have prepared Jimin for the sight in the throne room.

His mother was hunched on the stone floor, dry heaving into a puddle of her own vomit.

He wanted to rush to her, to shield her from whatever horror had unravelled her so utterly. But as he tried to move, the soldier's grip clamped down on his arm.

"Let me go," Jimin snapped, wrenching his arm free. He stumbled forward, his gaze flickering from his mother to the centre of the room—then he froze.

Seokjin's body lay sprawled across the stone.

His face was slack, his eyes still open in a glassy stare. A dark, wet line marked his throat. Blood pooled beneath him, black against the cold stone and spreading like ink.

Jimin's heart slammed in his chest, each beat stretching into eternity. Jungkook stood at the far end of the hall, leaning against the throne in all his casual, unsettling arrogance. The same throne Seokjin was meant to sit on. Jimin's hands balled into fists, every muscle in his body coiling tight with fear and anger and blind panic.

He charged, his only aim to strike the usurper down down.

The hall was too wide, too endless. Jungkook's men stepped forward. In only one lunge several of them had blocked his path, their weapons raised in a glint of steel. From the corner of his eye, Jimin caught the faintest movement. Jungkook raised his hand in a small, almost indifferent gesture. Instantly, the men lowered their weapons and parted, clearing a direct path between Jimin and him.

Jimin had no weapon of his own. His claws didn't curl like a predator's. He could perhaps use his teeth, though it would hardly matter against a wolf like Jeon Jungkook. His limbs were weak, his body unarmed.

Still, he ran.

The alpha caught him before he could close the distance between them. He twisted Jimin's arms behind his back and pinned him close. Jimin struggled, but it was like pushing against iron. The pressure of his chest against Jimin's back was like a furnace, too close, too much.

"Watch yourself, little prince," he murmured. "One wrong move, and you'll end up just like your brother."

The words chilled him to the bone. He redoubled his attempts but the alpha only tightened his grip. Pain flared up his arm, dragging an unwilling gasp from his lips. He could feel Jungkook's gaze searing into him, studying him keenly. A shiver of dread rippled through his spine. It was more than a hunter's gaze.

He wasn't let go so much as he was thrown down the steps of the dais. Jimin stumbled, barely keeping his footing as he caught himself. Humiliation burned hot and sharp as Jungkook circled him, his eyes roving over him with that same unnerving intensity. Beneath it, he could feel something darker, something that twisted low in Jimin's gut. His heart pounded hard enough that he feared the alpha could hear it.

Finally, Jungkook turned to the queen. "Your omega son, I gather?" He tilted his head slightly, his dark gaze flicking back to Jimin. "A fine face. You kept him hidden well enough."

Jimin felt his cheeks burn, but he held his chin high. He couldn't see his mother from where his head was angled, but he could hear her indignant huff. It lingered there, almost a shape in itself, wrapping around them both.

"You can never be the king of this kingdom," she said. "The people will remember what you've done here, the blood you've spilled. You'll be nothing more than a tyrant."

Jungkook's lips curled, his smirk untouched by the weight of her words. The accusations she hurled at him seemed to roll from him like rain from steel. He took a step closer to the queen, not just undeterred but almost entertained. Her defiance seemed no more significant to him than a buzzing fly, something to be swatted aside at his whim.

"They'll remember," he agreed. "But history also remembers the victor, Your Majesty. And today, it seems that victory belongs to me." He shifted and his shadow fell long and heavy over him. "You do realise that without heirs, there's nothing your people can do to challenge my claim. Though," he mused, "—it would be a pity to mar the pretty face of your lovely omega son."

A man who looked old enough to be Jimin's grandfather stepped forward with a small, deferential bow. "Sire, there is one other way to make your claim irrefutable." He gathered his breath upon a wheeze. "A royal marriage. To one of the remaining bloodline."

Jungkook's eyes sharpened, his gaze returning to Jimin with renewed interest. A flicker of something darkly pleased lighted his features. He reached out to trace the line of Jimin's jaw, all the way down to his neck. It raised the little hairs at Jimin's nape, the goosebumps on his skin. He flinched, pulling back.

"A royal marriage, you say," Jungkook contemplated. "It seems fitting, don't you think?" He started to raise his hand again, only to stop short. His fingers curled into a clenched fist. "Since your family saw fit to end mine, you'll now breed me a new one."

Jimin's eyes widened. Horror mingled with disbelief as he looked between his mother's stricken face and the alpha's cold, assessing gaze.

"You filthy bastard!" The queen spat. "You dare tie yourself to the same blood you sought to erase?"

The alpha tilted his head, his posture stiffening as he turned his full attention to her. "Consider it a poetic twist, Your Majesty. One son lost, and another given, to help build a

future under my rule."

"You delude yourself," his mother hissed, pushing herself to her feet. She made way despite the guards closing in around her. "You think you can force loyalty, or even bend bloodlines to your will? The people will rise against you. You'll fall like the tyrant you are."

"Let them rise if they dare." He waved a dismissive hand. "I'll meet them with fire and steel. But as for your son—" He turned back to Jimin, his eyes sweeping over him audaciously. "He will not be a pawn of rebellion, nor will he be wasted in defiance. He will be my omega consort."

"No I will *not*—" The tremor in Jimin's tone was impossible to mask. "I would rather die than mate you."

"Die?" Jungkook's lips quirked. "You would choose death over survival? How quaint. But I wonder, Omega, would you truly? Think of your mother, your people." He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a low rumble. "What will they endure if you refuse me?"

He felt the colour drain from his face. He saw the blood that already stained the hall, the bodies of loyal guards lying in grotesque stillness. The alpha's conquest was merciless but Jimin's mother was right, the people wouldn't simply bow to him. And that meant his hold on power was far from secure.

Could Jimin perhaps play this game and bide his time? Could he protect his people from within?

"You will regret this, Jeon Jungkook," the queen said, stumbling towards them. "My son is not yours to command."

The alpha's gaze snapped to her, his amusement vanishing. "He's mine if I say he is. And he will wed me, or your kingdom will burn for your arrogance."

Jimin's thoughts churned, each one heavier than the last. He looked at his mother and saw the anguish in her eyes. Something within him twisted. "I'll do it," he said. His mother gasped. His stomach lurched and the taste of bile crept up his throat. "But on one condition."

Jungkook's brow arched. "You presume to set terms?"

He forced himself to meet the alpha's cold gaze. "Swear to spare my people. Leave them in peace, and I will do as you ask."

For a moment, Jeon Jungkook said nothing, his dark eyes searching Jimin's face. Then, slowly, he inclined his head. "Very well. You have my word."

The queen's cry of protest was drowned out by the weight of Jimin's surrender. As the alpha gestured for his men to withdraw, Jimin remained unmoving. The gravity of his choice settled over him like a cold cloak. *By starlight, we endure*—that had always been the words of his house, but now it felt like the ugliest of truths he would have to live by. For his people. For the future.

6.

The graves had been hastily dug. They were no more but shallow wounds in the ground.

There were no tombstones, no markers. No names, no symbols. Just crude stakes driven into the earth to mark where his father and brothers now lay. They were wrapped in stained shrouds, their royal lineage reduced to the anonymity of earth and dust.

Mourners keened in agony, their cries rising like ghostly echoes.

Jimin stood beside his mother. The hem of her mourning robes brushed the dirt, her veil doing little to obscure the tears she wiped away with a handkerchief. Her hands trembled, though she tried to restrain them. Always composed, even now. He wondered if she felt the same hollowness he did or if hers was the weight of something deeper, heavier.

He didn't kneel by the graves as she had earlier. He couldn't bring himself to.

From the fringes of the forest trees, Jungkook stared at them. He'd been there since the first bell tolled, watching as grave diggers pierced the parched earth with their spades. Jimin's eyes found him and lingered, unable to look away until finally, Jungkook stirred.

The mourners fell silent one by one, their grief smothered by the sheer presence of him. He stopped some ways away. And then his gaze swept over the scene before settling on Jimin.

The sun bled out across the horizon, its molten reds and golds spilling over Jungkook and the barren field.

Ever since accepting he'd become Jungkook's mate, Jimin had since felt a compulsion in him. A kind of compulsion to gravitate towards the alpha. It was a cruel irony this compulsion, this traitorous yearning, for the very man who had torn his world apart.

"You should be thanking me," Jungkook said.

Jimin raised his eyes to meet his.

"This is more than your father ever gave his enemies. I could have done the same. Mounted their heads on spikes for the crows to feast upon, their bones left to bleach under the sun."

His mother snapped. "How dare you speak of the king—"

"I *am* the king," Jungkook thundered.

Jimin touched her arm gently. She flinched though she quelled her words, pressing the handkerchief harder against her lips.

"What would you have me say?" Jimin asked.

Jungkook stepped closer, the measured weight of his boots crunching against the dry earth. His dark eyes held Jimin's, scrutinizing, unrelenting. "I want to hear you thank me. Not with empty words, but with your heart behind them. Wet your lips, press them together, and speak as if you mean it."

Heat pooled in his cheeks. From shame. From indignation. From the pull of forbidden desire. His thighs clenched involuntarily at the thought of the intimacy he would soon share with the alpha. And perhaps that was why he held his tongue, swallowing words of insolence that burned at the back of his throat. Any protest would be a victory for Jungkook, who sought to strip away Jimin's pride, to humble him in front of his people.

Jimin looked away, back to the horizon where the sun continued its descent. It felt easier to watch the day die than to meet the insistence in Jungkook's eyes.

"We will not forget this mercy, Your Majesty. Thank you."

"We do not thank a monster butcher—"

"Mother please," Jimin said.

The mourners cried louder, their voices rising in shrill agony. Women wailed, clawing at the dirt, their bodies trembling as though they might collapse under the force of their sorrow. But Jimin didn't move. He didn't cry.

Jungkook inclined his head, his gaze lingering on Jimin for a beat longer. "Do you mourn for them?"

"I do."

"You say the words, but you don't shed a single tear. Why is that?"

Why is that indeed, Jimin wondered. "Grief shows itself in many ways, Your Majesty."

"You will call me by my name when we're mated."

"If you wish." Jimin exhaled.

"You don't weep for them because your pride won't let you. Yet that same pride lets you bow in thanks to me."

"What else would you have me do?" Jimin retorted. "Would you have me curse your name like the others? Or lie beside them in the grave?"

Jungkook's smirk returned, darker this time. "Perhaps. Or perhaps I'd have you show me something real."

Before Jimin could respond, Jungkook's hand reached for him. His lips descended without warning, capturing Jimin's in a searing kiss that stole the air from his lungs. It was wet, messy, their breaths knotting together like tangled thread. Saliva slicked their mouths, and Jungkook delved deeper, coaxing a trembling breath from Jimin's chest. Then he pulled back

as abruptly as he had leaned in, his breath ghosting against Jimin's lips. "That is how one mourns."

Jimin's hand shot up instinctively, ready to slap him, but Jungkook caught his wrist midair. His grip was iron. "When I take you, you'll forget your father, your brothers, all of them. You'll beg for nothing but my cock inside you again."

"I won't—"

"You will," Jungkook murmured. He glanced towards the queen, his dark eyes blazing. And then he turned and retreated into the gathering dusk.

Jimin watched him go, the cold inside him sinking deeper. He was too ashamed of the hitch in his breath, his scent turning sweet. He feared what his mother might say to him.

"You thank him too quickly."

"If we disobey him, he would take more from us."

"That man will burn," his mother swore. "He would burn in all seven hells."

Jimin wanted to feel the grief the others carried so easily, the loss that spilled out of them in waves. He wanted to cry, to scream, to wail. But all he could feel was emptiness, a hollow ache that gnawed at his insides.

His family was gone, and with them, the alphas who had once protected their name, their home, their honour. For an omega, the loss of an alpha was more than death. It was the unmooring of the very foundation upon which they stood. His mother was still there, but she couldn't shield him from what was to come.

No one could.

7.

“You look beautiful, Jimin. Like a jewel in moonlight. They’ll sing of this day, but no song will speak of the sacrifices you make. They never do.”

Jimin’s throat tightened, but he said nothing. He stared ahead, watching his own reflection in the mirror before him. The porcelain of his skin glowed under the soft light, his robes were folded neatly beside him. They shimmered faintly, threads of silver and gold catching the flames like fireflies.

“Do you hate him, Mother?” he asked at last, his voice barely above a whisper. “Jeon Jungkook.”

Her hands stilled completely. She met his gaze in the mirror, her eyes sharp and heavy with meaning. “Hate is too simple a word for what I feel.” She combed a section of his hair against the back of her hand. “He’s taken too much from us, your father, your brothers. Blood we can never reclaim. And now, he takes you.”

He searched her reflection for something—anything. “I don’t want to upset you. I don’t want you to look at me and see…”

“Him?” she finished for him. “Don’t be foolish, Jimin. You’re my son. My last son. Whatever comes of this, you will remain that to me.”

His shoulders sagged. Her fingers resumed their work.

“But you must remember that even the strongest alpha can be swayed, not with love, but with cunning. The bastard boy will expect obedience. He will expect you to surrender all of yourself to him. You can’t allow that.”

Jimin frowned. “How do I stop it?”

She finished braiding his hair and reached for a pin, securing the final twist with a steady hand. Her fingers lingered at the nape of his neck, cool against his skin.

“You hold yourself apart. You give him nothing but what duty demands. When he takes you —” her voice faltered. “When he takes you, don’t give him your pleasure. Do not let him believe he owns it.”

Jimin’s cheeks flushed, and he turned his face away. “Mother, please—”

“This isn’t a conversation I wish to have either,” she said, her tone sharp enough to cut. Then, softer, she added, “But it’s one we must have. You’re an omega, and this is the burden of our kind. You may feel drawn to him—his scent, his touch. Your body may betray you. But you must remember who you are. You’re my son, the last hope of our family. Don’t let him take that from you.”

Jimin swallowed hard, his hands curling into fists in his lap. “I don’t want this,” he admitted, his voice breaking. “I don’t want him.”

Her hand cupped his cheek, her touch uncharacteristically soft. “I know. I would spare you this if I could. If there were another way—”

Her voice trailed off, but the unspoken truth danced between them. There was no other way.

After a moment, she pulled back and straightened his shoulders, her face composed once more. “You will wear these robes,” she reached for the bundle of cloth, her tone brisk. “You will walk into the godswood with your head high, and you will remind them all that you’re not a prize to be claimed. You’re the son of the Moonstone House, the blood of kings. And this blood doesn’t kneel, even if it must lie down.”

Jimin nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat.

“And Jimin?” she called, her voice softening.

He turned to face her fully, his eyes wide and glistening.

“You’re beautiful. Let them look, let them envy. But never let them own you. You are a wolf in silk. Remember it.”

Jimin nodded, but his throat burned with unshed tears.

She moved around him, arranging his stones and jewels, the oils and perfumes laid carefully before him. The flowers in his boudoir were fresh and vibrant, but they weren’t his favourite. At the door, she paused and turned back, her expression grave. “Even in submission, power can still be wielded. Don’t forget that.”

8.

The godswood sprawled before him. Oaks and towering redwoods cast long shadows in the amber light of dusk, their branches tangled like the fingers of forgotten deities. The scent of Jimin's sweet jasmine swirled with moss and smoke burning at the altar.

Jimin stood at the heart of it, poised in robes that gleamed like the black night. Fine silk flowed around him in elegant layers, each fold stitched with silver-threaded patterns of wolves, of gold stars and the pale crescent of the rising moon. His long hair was plaited intricately, threaded with thin chains of polished stone that caught the light as he moved.

He was unearthly, a figure of songs, his beauty too fragile for what was about to be asked of him.

His mother stood next to him. Behind them, the gathered council and lords formed a half-circle. All of them had their eyes fixed on the altar where Jimin would be claimed. The weight of their gazes burned against his skin, but none burned hotter than Jeon Jungkook's.

The alpha was clad in dark leathers and armour that was strapped with crimson accents. He looked like a beast brought to heel, wild and untamed, barely restrained by the trappings of ceremony. His eyes had been on Jimin from the moment he entered the wood path, following his every move with an intensity that made Jimin's skin prickle. There was nothing gentle in those eyes, nothing kind. It was unabashed, as though Jungkook could see through the layers of silk to the pale flesh that had been scrubbed and oiled just for him.

The High Septon's voice echoed deep and resonant through the godswood. It wove an incantation that carried the weight of centuries. Shadows danced on the stone altar, cast by flames that burned low and steady in the sacred pyres.

Jimin stood at Jungkook's side, his gaze fixed on the length of ribbon in the High Septon's hands. It was a mix of gold and red, like divine fire. He could feel the finality of it, as if the ground beneath him knew there was no turning back now. The alpha's hand closed around his, the roughness of his skin a stark contrast to Jimin's pampered softness.

The High Septon began the binding. He looped the ribbon around their wrists, and their thumbs and fingers.

"By this ribbon, the gods witness your union." His chants rippled through the grove. "As fire and blood are eternal, so too is this bond. As the sun and moon share the sky, so shall you share your fates."

The alpha turned his head, his dark eyes finding Jimin's. The look he gave was molten, a possessiveness that sent a shiver racing down Jimin's spine.

The High Septon handed him an obsidian chalice. Jimin hesitated. His mother's voice rang in his ears, *Do not give him your pleasure. Do not let him believe he owns it.* The High Septon's eyes bore into him. Slowly, Jimin reached out, his fingers curling around its stem.

“Drink, and let the gods’ blessing flow through you.”

Jimin raised the cup to his lips. The ambrosia was thick, its sweetness almost cloying before the spice burned down his throat like liquid fire. Heat surged through him. It pooled low in his belly and spread outward in waves. His knees nearly buckled and he was sure he’d sway if not for the alpha’s steady grip. The jasmine in the air thickened, almost oppressive, wrapping around them like a silken noose.

He passed the chalice to the alpha, refusing to meet his eye.

“Repeat after me,” the High Septon commanded.

“I bind my fate to yours, as the gods have willed it. In fire, in blood, in body, and in soul.”

“I bind my fate to yours—” The words left Jungkook’s mouth with the weight of his own oath. “As the gods have willed it. In fire, in blood, in body, and in soul.”

The High Septon tied the last knot, securing the ribbon tightly around their hands. He dipped his fingers into vermillion paste, drawing three lines across their foreheads, two down their cheeks. It stung as though ignited by the gods themselves, branding their pledge into flesh. Three lines across their foreheads to symbolise the three elements of their union: the fire of passion that would bind them, the blood that tied their bloodlines, and the soul that would forever remain tethered to one another.

Then two strokes on either cheek to mark the sacred balance. Alpha and omega. Sun and moon.

“Your souls are bound, your bodies are one. What the gods have sealed, no mortal can undo.”

Jimin’s head swam. His body was aflame with a heat that singed through every nerve. The air around them was dense with scent, his own, thick and sweet, and the alpha’s heady cedar. Jasmine and woodsmoke wove together, clinging to the space between them. Jungkook’s grip on his wrist tightened, his nostrils flared. A low growl escaped him, his pupils round and large. There it was again, that flicker of crimson in his irises.

The High Septon’s voice faded into the background. All Jimin could feel was Jungkook—the heat of his body, the power in his presence, the overwhelming scent of cedar and smoke that left Jimin gasping. Whatever the gods had blessed or cursed they were now fettered by it.

The pyres crackled, and the earth itself hummed in response.

Jimin’s lips parted as he sucked in shallow breaths, his body trembling under the burden of the ambrosia’s effects. His senses sang alive.

There was only one act left to the ceremony.

“Complete the bond,” the High Septon instructed. Then he stepped aside, his head dipped into a bow.

From the pyres came the roar of fire and the ghost of burned herbs. The offerings to the gods felt too distant now. They had long since strayed beyond the reach of morality and virtue. All that remained was heat—the alpha's and the one burning in Jimin's chest.

Jungkook moved first. His hands deftly untied the ribbons that bound them. The chains fell away, but the invisible pull between them tightened, curling around Jimin's chest. The alpha stepped closer, towering over him, his gaze roaming over Jimin's flushed skin.

"I don't want to," Jimin whispered. His voice trembled as much as his hands, but there was no conviction behind his words. Desire coiled in him like a serpent. He gripped his robes, trying in vain to shield himself. But the alpha caught his wrists, prying them apart as easily as they were petals.

"Don't hide from me."

The alpha's fingers traced down the delicate embroidery of Jimin's robes, brushing the silk aside. The fabric slipped away like water, cascading down his body in a whisper until it pooled at his feet.

The cool night air kissed his skin, but it was nothing compared to the heat radiating from the alpha's body. Jimin's breath hitched. He stood exposed, every inch of him vulnerable to the alpha's scorching gaze. He had never been laid bare for another before, and the sheer intimacy of it burned through him like wildfire.

His body was keenly aware of the dozens of eyes watching—lords and councilmen, warriors and priests. Among them, his mother, her face pale, the furrow in her brows stern. His stomach twisted as he caught her expression over the alpha's shoulder. A choking heat of mortification bloomed in his chest.

And then the alpha stepped closer and she was gone from his view.

His pupils were blown wide as his eyes inspected Jimin's body. His gaze lingered on the soft arch of Jimin's hipbones, the faint pink flush that dusted his chest, the subtle ripple of muscle along his thighs. He tilted his head, eyes tracing lines and curves as though committing every inch to memory.

Slowly, he unbuckled his breast plate and stripped off his leathers. A faint sheen of sweat caught the firelight, accentuating the sharp cut of his jaw, the swell of his shoulders. His cock was heavy and flushed, and it brushed against Jimin's thigh. More than the contact, the sight of it—thick and swollen, and glistening at the tip—sent a tremor through Jimin's legs. His knees felt weak, unsteady. He averted his gaze, but the alpha's rough hand caught his chin, forcing him back.

"Don't look away from me," Jungkook commanded, his voice a low snarl. The whites of his eyes were swallowed by a flare of red.

Jimin licked over his lips, his breath shallow as the alpha's other hand slid down his spine, trailing heat in its wake. It dipped lower, spreading the slick that had gathered between

Jimin's thighs. A broken moan escaped him as the alpha's fingers teased his entrance, circling but not breaching, his touch stubbornly light.

"You're dripping for me," the alpha said. He seemed satisfied. "Do you feel how much your body wants this?"

Jimin whimpered. Shame warred with the undeniable ache building inside him. "They're watching."

"Let them," he growled. "Let them see who you belong to."

The alpha's hands gripped his hips, lifting him effortlessly onto the altar. The cold stone bit into Jimin's skin. In front, he was scorched by the alpha's feverish heat. Jungkook spread his thighs wide, exposing him fully to whoever was watching. Jimin felt his belly stretch as he arched upward. A hum rippled through the crowd, whispers barely muffled, but the alpha paid them no mind. His focus was singular, unrelenting.

Jimin's face burned. No matter how he struggled, the alpha kept his legs fanned open. He leaned down, his breath hot against Jimin's ear. "Let them see how well you take your mate."

Then he lined himself up and thrust inside. The stretch was instant, searing, and Jimin cried out, his nails digging into the alpha's shoulders. The burn gave way to a fullness so overwhelming it left him gasping, his head thrown back.

"Gods," Jungkook hissed, his voice ragged. "Look how tight you are."

He snapped his hips faster, his eyes drawn to where cock entered Jimin's hole. Each thrust sent a shockwave through Jimin's body, the sound of skin slapping against skin filling the sacred grove.

Jimin clung to him, his body pliant under the alpha's control. His own arousal dripped onto his stomach, the friction sending jolts of pleasure through his core. His cries grew louder, shameless and unrestrained, echoing into the night.

The alpha's cock filled him completely, each thrust dragging against sensitive nerves that made Jimin's vision blur. "You're mine," he growled, his hands gripping Jimin's thighs so tightly he was sure it would leave bruises. "Say it."

Jimin sobbed, his body trembling as pleasure coiled tight in his belly. "Yours," he gasped. "I'm yours."

Jungkook fucked into him harder, faster. He leaned down, his teeth scraping against Jimin's neck before sinking in deep. Pain lanced through him, sharp and hot, but it only pushed him higher, tipping him over the edge. Jimin's body convulsed, his release painting his stomach as he cried out the alpha's name.

Jungkook followed moments later, his hips slamming into Jimin as he spilled inside him. He came and came in an unrelenting waves. The force of it seemed to reverberate through their bond. It snapped into place in a way that left Jimin breathless. His body trembled under the

intensity of it, caught between the instinct to flee and the call to stay. It both seared and soothed, like an ache that refused to fade. A craving he couldn't deny.

When the alpha pulled back, his lips were stained with blood, his eyes glowing faintly with triumph. He cupped Jimin's face.

"You're mine," he said again, loud enough for all to hear. "My omega, my mate."

Jimin's body sagged against him, his chest heaving as he fought to catch his breath. Over the alpha's shoulder, his mother's eyes bore into him. Shame prickled under his skin, warring against the illicit thrill coursing through him. And yet, even under the crushing gaze of the woman who had given him life, he found himself uncaring.

He was Jungkook's. And Jungkook was his.

9.

The great hall brimmed with life. A cacophony of music, laughter, and clinking goblets swirled together. The merry glow of candlelight danced across oak tables and over the rough tunics of the townsfolk. They revelled in jubilant chaos, celebrating the union with spit-roasted boars and casks of mead.

For one night, it seemed, even the weight of war could be forgotten.

But Jimin could barely taste the food before him. His fingers toyed absently with a goblet of his own alcohol, his thoughts splintered and far. Outwardly, he imagined he presented the picture of regal elegance, sitting poised by Jungkook's side. The sheen of sweat on his forehead made him glow, his cheeks flushed with the warmth of health. The fresh bite marks from the alpha stood out starkly on his neck, partially exposed beneath the careless drape of his robes. It certainly didn't go unnoticed.

Congratulations spilled forth like wine from the lords and councilmen who approached the table.

"Heartiest wishes, my prince," one said, bowing low before glancing too long at the juncture of Jimin's neck and shoulder. Jimin's cheeks warmed. It was as though they still saw him stripped bare, his cries echoing in their ears.

And after so many, his replies were perfunctory, murmured in a daze.

The townsfolk were loud, unrestrained, their joy spilling over in raucous shouts and stomping feet. They clapped along to the musicians who played fiddles and drums to a lively tune.

How could they celebrate, he wondered. These were the same people Jungkook's army must have ravaged on its path to the castle. The siege had been brutal, his father's banners burned, his men slaughtered. Surely, these revellers had suffered the same? Yet here they were, raising their cups, shouting blessings, and dancing as though their lives hadn't been upended.

A hush fell over the dais. Jimin froze as the queen ascended the steps to the high table. Her gown of blue and silver trailed behind her. Her expression was as frosty as the snowstorms that battered the northern peaks.

She stopped in front of them, her gaze cutting first to Jungkook, then to Jimin. "My king," she said stiffly, inclining her head toward Jungkook. "My son."

Jimin couldn't bring himself to look at her. His hands trembled where they gripped the stem of his goblet.

"You have taken what you came for. My kingdom, my blood. May you find your victory worth the cost."

Jimin winced, his breath catching.

“Oh, it is, Your Grace,” Jungkook drawled, leaning back in his seat. His hand tightened on Jimin’s thigh. “I trust it was worth the spectacle for you as well, to witness your son so thoroughly claimed. You were watching, weren’t you? Or did you look away when I fucked his dripping hole?”

The queen’s face remained stoic, but her lips thinned, and her knuckles whitened as she clasped her hands before her. “You’d do well to remember that the crown rests uneasily when balance is unsettled, my king. Enjoy your feast.”

She turned sharply on her heel and disappeared into the throng. Jimin burned under the exchange, mortified and furious, but also—Gods, why did he feel this way?—a wicked shiver coursed down his spine. He must be mistaken of course, but it almost felt like the stirrings of a heat.

Jungkook chuckled beside him. “Quite the bitter old widow, isn’t she? You’d think she’d show a little more joy on her son’s wedding day.”

Jimin snapped his head to glare at Jungkook, but his retort died as the music swelled. The alpha stood, and extended a hand towards him.

“Dance with me, Park Jimin.”

Jimin rose hesitantly, his limbs moving as if on strings. Jungkook led him to the open space before the hearth. His hand found the small of Jimin’s back, drawing him close. “Breathe,” Jungkook murmured, his breath warm against Jimin’s ear.

Jimin obeyed, though the sharp inhale caught in his lungs as Jungkook swept him into motion. The music played on, thin and distant, while the silence between each note grew heavier, almost palpable. All around him, the weight of stares pressed in. Every instinct in Jimin screamed to please, to fall in step with the alpha. Jungkook moved with practised ease, and Jimin could do little more than follow. He felt the press of Jungkook’s palm against his waist, the heat of his body close enough to sear.

“You’re so tense. Are you scared of me?”

Jimin’s heart pounded, his face prickled with warmth. “No.”

“Liar.” The music surged, and Jungkook spun him, pulling him back against his chest. Their bodies collided. Jimin gasped, and Jungkook leaned in close, his lips ghosting over Jimin’s temple. “You reek of my scent, my cum. Do you know what that does to an alpha? It makes him mad. It makes him want to hold his omega’s legs apart and bury his cock in his hole.”

Jimin’s chest heaved as the words wrapped around him. Jungkook’s hand slid lower, teasing the line of his hip.

“Do you feel it yet?” he whispered, his lips grazing Jimin’s earlobe. “The urge to fuck and fuck until you can’t remember your own name anymore?”

“No—”

“No? Then why can I smell it on you?”

“That’s not true. I don’t—”

“My sweet little liar,” Jungkook interrupted, his tone dripping with amusement. He leaned in, inhaling deeply against the curve of Jimin’s neck. “How precious that you think you can deny me.”

Jimin shuddered, a tremor running through him as his body betrayed him yet again. His fingers curled into the fabric of Jungkook’s tunic, unsure if he was trying to push him away or pull him closer. The firelight danced in Jungkook’s eyes, casting shadows that made his smirk look almost predatory.

“I could take you right here,” Jungkook murmured, his lips brushing against Jimin’s ear. “In front of all of them. You took me so well earlier I’m tempted to have an audience again.”

“Don’t—”

Jungkook’s smirk widened. “Don’t what? Don’t touch you?” He spun Jimin again, pulling him back into the heat of his chest. “Or don’t stop? You couldn’t fight me if you wanted to.”

And it was true. Jimin’s legs were weak. The heat low in his stomach coiled tighter, robbing him of any strength to resist. He hated that Jungkook could unravel him so easily, reduce him to this breathless, powerless mess. But worst of all, he hated how much he wanted to give in, to let the fire that burned inside him consume him completely.

The song slowed to a fading legato, and applause erupted around him. Jimin hadn’t noticed when the townsfolk had poured onto the floor, but as the next tune began, he was swept away into the arms of a lord with a smile too sharp and hands too bold. One dance blended into another, and faces changed as the circle of revelry moved.

Jimin’s body grew hotter with each moment, his skin tingling, his breaths shallow.

Between his many partners, he could only hear the laughs and see the smiles. And his head churned and churned.

Then, a hand found his. The man’s hair was a wild auburn, his grin quicksilver. “You look as though your mind is far from here.”

Jimin blinked, the haze of the night thick around him. “I was only thinking... They’re all so happy. Yet my kingdom is in ruins.”

The stranger’s brow arched. “Ruins? Is that what you believe? And when last did you venture beyond these stone walls?”

“I—what?”

“You royals never leave your thrones, do you? You sit here, wrapped in your silks, blind to the suffering of the people. You’re all the same.”

Jimin's mind struggled to focus, the heat in his veins clouding his thoughts. "What—what are you saying?"

"Your king spares those who surrender. He fights only when there is no other choice. Even then, he takes prisoners rather than corpses."

Jimin stared, his steps faltering. "You speak as if you've seen it yourself."

"I have."

They came to a halt. "Who are you?"

Before the man could respond, the shadow of a familiar presence loomed over him. Jungkook cut in, his expression darker now. "I think you've had enough of my mate, don't you?"

The red-haired man laughed, bowing as he relinquished Jimin. "Enjoy the night, my king. Your Highness."

Jimin barely had time to steady himself before Jungkook's arms were around him again. The heat of the alpha's body was almost unbearable, and Jimin let out a soft whimper, his legs weak beneath him. Jungkook's lips brushed his temple.

All the tumult of his thoughts vanished swiftly like a thread in the wind. Jimin knew but one thing—Jungkook. He couldn't deny the yearning in his bones nor the way his body hungered only for the alpha's touch, his cock.

"Are you burning for me, Omega?"

"Please..." Jimin breathed, though he could hardly form the words.

It *was* his heat.

Jungkook's grip tightened, his voice a growl. "You were made for this, weren't you? My sweet, good omega."

10.

Jimin stirred awake.

The air was stale, a little musky. The room was still, broken only by the soft crackling of the hearth.

His body ached. Every inch of him felt ravaged, used, and thoroughly claimed. The sharp throb of the bond mark at his neck sent a shiver down his spine, as if even in his rest, Jungkook's bite demanded his submission.

Fragments of his heat came to him in a blur—the stretch of his body yielding, the all-consuming rush of pleasure as he felt Jungkook filling him. He couldn't tell how many nights had passed. Everything blurred into a rush of heat and slick, his mind too fogged to remember more.

Jimin had tried to resist, as his mother had warned him to. But the bond was relentless. Every flicker of sensation made him drip and soak. Every shiver, every gasp was reflected back tenfold. He hadn't known where his pleasure ended and where the alpha's began.

His alpha.

He shifted beneath the silk covers, but a sharp sting deep inside him made him pause.

Tentatively, Jimin slid his hand down his chest, resting it lightly over the curve of his belly. A strange, intimate warmth lingered there, and an odd thought crossed his mind. Could he still feel the alpha there? His hand drifted lower, brushing over his skin until they reached between his thighs. The instant his fingers grazed his hole, he froze. It was wet, unbearably slick, and his body clenched instinctively around the remnants of Jungkook's seed. His face flushed a deep red and he snatched his hand away.

"Don't stop on my account."

Jimin's head snapped to the side, his heart lurching in his chest.

Jungkook was sitting against one of the bedposts like a king on a throne, naked as the day he was born. He watched Jimin with a lazy smirk, his eyes as dark as midnight. The fire from the hearth bathed his body, illuminating every sharp line of muscle, every scar that told of battles won.

"You—" Jimin stammered, his voice coming out hoarse. "You were awake?"

Jungkook tilted his head, a lock of inky hair falling across his forehead. "Of course. I went to great lengths to claim you, I should make the most of it. You've been sleeping restlessly. Did I not satisfy you, little omega?"

Jimin's cheeks flared red and he turned his face away. He was mortified to be asked, let alone to be caught.

“Look at me,” Jungkook snapped.

His smirk had faded, replaced by something sharper, hungrier. He pushed off the bedpost with the languid grace of a predator, the bed dipping under his weight as he crawled towards Jimin. “I told you not to look away from me.” His hand shot out, gripping Jimin’s chin with enough force to make him gasp. The alpha turned his face, forcing their eyes to meet.

“You’re mine now,” Jungkook said. “Every part of you belongs to me—your body, your bond, your breath. You don’t get to hide from me.”

Jimin tried to look anywhere but at the man before him, but Jungkook’s hold didn’t waver. “I—I didn’t mean to—”

“You belong to me now—” His thumb traced the curve of Jimin’s bottom lip. “And I don’t want your submission in halves.”

Jimin trembled. His skin burned where Jungkook touched him, his scent so potent it made his head spin. His lips parted.

“I didn’t ask for this.”

“And yet here you are.” Jungkook murmured, leaning in until their noses nearly brushed. His other hand slid down Jimin’s side to grip his hip. “Here you are, slick with my seed, trembling beneath me like the prettiest thing to fuck.”

Jimin whimpered, his pride and resistance crumbling.

“Say it,” Jungkook demanded, his lips ghosting over Jimin’s ear. “Say my name. Call me what I am to you now.”

The bond pulled at him like a siren’s song. Jungkook’s hand slid lower, his fingers brushing over the sensitive stretch of Jimin’s entrance. He jerked away with a stilted cry, but there was nowhere to go.

“Say it,” Jungkook growled, his teeth grazing the mark on Jimin’s neck. His cock was hard and wet, pressing insistently against Jimin’s thigh. “Say it, Omega. Or shall I remind you who you belong to?”

“I... I don’t want to.”

The corner of Jungkook’s lips tugged upwards. His cock left a trail as he dragged it against Jimin’s stomach. He rocked his hips slowly, deliberately, dragging the length of himself against Jimin’s skin. “Your body doesn’t seem to agree.”

Jimin’s chest heaved. “A-Alpha...”

“That’s better,” Jungkook murmured, his tone softening just enough to send a shiver down Jimin’s spine. “My good omega.”

He pushed Jimin onto his back, spreading his legs with ease as he settled between them. Jimin whimpered as Jungkook's cock slid against his hole. He lingered there, the blunt head of his cock nudging against Jimin's entrance. He pressed in just the tip, pulling back only to push it in again. When he finally forced his entire length in, it was with measured restraint, as if relishing the way Jimin's body tensed and yielded to him.

"Look at me."

When Jimin looked, the sight of Jungkook's impassive face hit him like a stone over his head. His jaw was tight, his brows set in a deep frown.

"You'll remember this," Jungkook said, his hips rolling in a slow, punishing rhythm. "You'll remember every time I take you, every time I fill you, until it's all you can think about."

Jimin's head lolled back, his hands gripping the sheets as tears pricked at the corners of his eyes. "Please..." he begged, though he didn't know what he was begging for.

"Look at me," Jungkook insisted again. He snapped his hips with so much force Jimin slid up the bed. "I want to see you. All of you."

Jimin forced his eyes open, meeting Jungkook's gaze through a haze of pleasure. There was something wild in Jungkook's eyes, something raw and untamed, and it stole what little breath Jimin had left.

Jungkook fucked into him in earnest. His grunts grew ragged, sweat pooling on his skin, his body flexing and straining with each movement. He lowered himself until he had enveloped Jimin completely, his thumb brushing over the bond mark at his neck.

"You'll never forget this. You'll never forget who owns you."

11.

Jimin stood at the cracked window, feeling the ripple of cool breeze brushing his cheeks, the faint scent of rain carried in from the courtyard below. In his hands, he held a folded note. The parchment was of fine quality, but the ink was rushed and uneven and betrayed the urgency of its sender.

His heart tightened as he read the familiar handwriting.

Jimin,
A rebel seeks your counsel. You will find him just beyond the castle walls, I trust you know the way. You must go. There may be an opportunity to slip away unnoticed. Be swift. Do not linger.

The bond with Jungkook pulsed like a living thing. Already, the distance between them was a source of agony. But neither could he ignore his mother's plea, nor the cause to which he'd secretly sworn his loyalty.

He folded the note into tiny squares and glanced over his shoulder. The corridor outside the chambers was silent, save for the distant echo of boots on stone. These days, Jungkook spent his mornings in council chambers, his evenings with sword in hand, drilling his men. Jimin was left to linger alone, watched over by attendants who largely didn't dare meet his eye.

For ten days and ten nights since their mating, he was meant to remain within these walls, untouched by the world beyond. Each sunset dragged Jungkook back to him, fucking him into the sheets and leaving him wrecked and desperate. Even as the chains of his captivity tightened, he craved it.

The footsteps faded. Jimin exhaled. He couldn't wait.

Slipping a plain cloak over his shoulders, he stepped silently into the hall and made his way to the courtyard. The familiar tug of the bond urged him back, but he persisted.

A narrow alley lay just beyond the perimeter, catching the pale afternoon light as Jimin stepped into it. Shadows clung to the high walls, stretching out like fingers. Around a bend, a hooded figure was leaning casually against its surface.

"Your Highness," the man greeted.

Jimin pulled his cloak tighter, his fingers brushing the note hidden in its folds. "I don't have much time."

The man adjusted himself, his movements slow and purposeful though not aggressive. Beneath the shadow of his hood, his features were obscured. "Time is all we lack," he muttered. "The rebellion needs you now more than ever, Prince Jimin. Without your aid, we cannot hope to succeed."

"What is it you need from me?"

The bond's pull was unbearable now, clawing at Jimin's resolve. Jungkook would sense his absence soon, if he hadn't already.

The man reached into his cloak and withdrew a dagger, its blade glinting wickedly. He extended it toward Jimin.

"Take this."

Jimin hesitated, his gaze flicking between the weapon and the man's shrouded face. "What do you want me to do?"

The man stepped closer, lowering his voice. "The castle is impenetrable. Its gates cannot be forced, its walls too high to scale. But you—within its halls, you can open the way. Let us in. A handful of assassins, swift and silent. It will be done before dawn."

"And if I can't?"

The man's voice hardened. "Then there is another way. Quicker. Certain." He pressed the dagger closer, the weight of it now undeniable. "Kill him. End this with your own hand. Without the bastard king, the empire will fracture. His armies will lose their leader, his men their purpose. The people will rise, and the war will end."

Jimin closed his hand around its hilt. The cold steel sent a jolt through him.

"You ask me to murder him?"

"Yes."

"Does the queen approve this plan?"

"The queen knows we will use whatever means necessary."

Jimin slipped the dagger into the folds of his robes. "You want me to kill my mate."

The hooded figure stepped back, his voice carrying a rueful edge. "Do you already care for him that much? More than your kingdom, more than the people suffering under his rule?"

Jimin's throat tightened. He shook his head. "Of course not. But I will suffer from it."

"And your people will remember your sacrifice."

They will sing songs of you, his mother once said, but not of his sacrifices. With the bond humming sharply in his mind, the mere thought of such betrayal felt like a physical wound.

"Time is short," the man said. "Open the gates, or—"

He didn't have to finish. Jimin nodded stiffly as he turned back towards the castle.

12.

The flower garden was one of the last corners of the castle that still held a whisper of what it had once been. Its paths were overgrown but familiar, and the flowers bloomed stubbornly despite the chaos of war. Jimin knelt by a patch of lilies, his fingers brushing against the petals as he tried to steady his racing thoughts.

Yesterday, Jungkook had told him that though his self-confinement had come to an end, he wanted Jimin to remain longer in his chambers. Jimin had left the gate open, as instructed, and the back sewer passage was clear. But the bell had not tolled, nor had mourners sung. Either the assassins were slow to strike, or, more likely, Jungkook had survived their attempt.

And if Jungkook had survived their attempt, it would mean he was clearly aware that there were efforts against him. That would make future attempts harder, for one, and for another, Jimin was at risk of being exposed.

He couldn't name the feeling gnawing at his chest knowing that the plans had fallen through, whether it was guilt, disappointment, or the faintest flicker of relief, but he knew that the confines of his chambers had grown unbearable. And so, with no one watching, he slipped out to the only place that felt like his own. Amidst the blooms his father had once nurtured, he found comfort.

Until the sun's rays gave way to a silhouette.

"You shouldn't be here."

Jimin jerked to his feet and spun around. He wasn't sure what he expected, but it certainly wasn't the man from the night of his mating. Who had danced with him. Who had sang praises of Jungkook's kind generosity.

Like Jungkook, he was tall and broad, his russet hair wild, as if untouched by a comb for days. His clothes were rough and threadbare, his arms hardened with labour. Under pure daylight, his appearance spoke of hard nights, harsh winds, and the gruelling life of one who had no need for ornamentation or care for how he looked. And still, he was handsome.

"Who are you?"

"Someone who's supposed to be watching you. I'm not doing a very good job if you're out here wandering around."

Watching him? Jimin's stomach twisted uneasily. If he had been watching Jimin yesterday, then he must know. Jimin took a step back, his fingers tightening around the folds of his robes. "I don't understand. Are you one of his men?"

The stranger tilted his head, his grin widening. "In a way. Taehyung, at your service. Or, well… more at the king's service."

"Why are you watching me?" Jimin asked.

“Orders are orders. The king wants to keep his pretty little mate safe.”

“Safe from what? This is *my* castle.”

Taehyung swept his eyes lazily over the surrounding walls. “Doesn’t seem like you’re much in charge of it anymore, does it?”

Jimin’s cheeks flooded with warmth. “What danger could there possibly be?”

“You truly can’t think of a single person who wishes to do you harm?”

“I don’t need protecting. And certainly not from *him*.”

“Ah, so that’s how it is,” Taehyung’s eyes crinkled, finding amusement in Jimin’s defensiveness. “You hate him, but you’re here. Wearing his mark. Drenched in his scent.” His gaze flicked down, lingering just long enough to make Jimin bristle. “And looking... so thoroughly fucked.”

Jimin’s jaw fell, his shock nearly blotting out every coherent thought. “You have no right to say that to me!”

“Oh, don’t look so scandalized. It’s no great secret that matings are for fucking.” His tone curled, as though sharing some sordid jest. “But it seems he hasn’t lost his touch. Jungkook always did know how to fuck the fight out of an omega.”

A rush of heat spread through Jimin’s chest, burning hotter than embarrassment. “You’re vile. Get away from me.”

Taehyung only laughed. “Touchy, aren’t we? Don’t worry, princeling. You’re important now, whether you like it or not. And considering what your dear father did to his family, I’d say it’s a kindness.”

“The Jeons are traitors. They deserved what they got.”

“The Jeons did nothing. It’s *your* father who was threatened—”

“That’s enough.” Jungkook stood at the edge of the garden. His presence was a storm contained just barely. He strode towards them, his boots crunching against the gravel path. “You were told to *observe,* not provoke, Taehyung.”

“Just making conversation,” Taehyung replied flippantly. “You need to tie this one to a leash.”

The alpha’s jaw set in a hard line. “Leave. Now.”

Taehyung held his ground for a moment longer, his gaze flitting between Jungkook and Jimin. Then, with a mocking bow, he turned on his heel and headed off. Jimin could feel Jungkook’s eyes on him, heavy and unreadable, as if weighing every ounce of his defiance. He drew in a shaky breath, his eyes firmly on the ground.

“What else did he say to you?”

“Nothing,” Jimin murmured.

“Look at me.”

Reluctantly, Jimin looked up. His heart skipped a beat. He felt the urge to embrace his mate, to kiss his lips and press into his neck. It seemed strange that even now, days later, the ambrosia still clouded his thoughts.

Jungkook was wrapped in dark leathers, the corners of his lips taut as though holding back something dangerous. His cedar drifted languidly. “You shouldn’t be roaming around.”

Jimin straightened, breathing in. “No, I don’t think so.”

13.

When a servant burst into his chambers, breathless and wide-eyed, Jimin braced himself for the worst.

“Your Highness,” the man gasped, nearly stumbling over the threshold. “The king… he demands your presence. Immediately.”

The sheen of sweat on the servant’s brow made it clear something was amiss, and a knot of unease curled in Jimin’s stomach. From the moment Jungkook entered his life, anxiety had wrapped itself around him.

He rose and disappeared behind a slipscreen. His maid followed in practiced silence, her nimble fingers moving quickly to strip him of his robes and drape fresh ones over his shoulders.

“Do you know why he’s called for me?”

“The council is in session. I… I don’t know what the king intends.”

“He’s asking for me in the council chambers?”

“Yes, my prince. He was most—” The servant swallowed hard. “—adamant.”

Jimin’s brow furrowed as he exited his chambers. “And the councilmen?”

“They were in the midst of debate. I don’t presume to understand their dealings.”

Jimin cast the man a sidelong glance but didn’t press. Servants always knew more than they let on. “Very well,” he said curtly.

As he neared the heavy wooden doors of the council room, the muffled sound of heated voices reached him. The lords were arguing, as they so often did. His mother had warned him of how Jungkook had overturned their carefully laid traditions, sidelining the loyal lords who had upheld the realm for generations. In their place, he favoured his own men and even common rural folk—people who, by the nobles’ estimation, were utterly unfit to navigate the complexities of governance.

Jimin hesitated for a moment, his hand hovering over the door handle. When he found the resolve to push it open, the room fell silent immediately. The eyes of every lord turned toward him. Officially, no omega had ever stepped foot in this chamber before, and Jimin could see their disapproval written clearly across their faces.

Jungkook’s expression lifted when Jimin came into view of him. “Ah, at last,” he drawled. “Come here, Omega.”

The lords shifted uneasily, but Jungkook’s intentions ruled over all of theirs. His fingers curled in a languid gesture. “There’s no chair for you, but I’m certain my lap will suffice.”

Jimin's lips parted, words of protest catching in his throat. Before he could voice them, Lord Soo surged to his feet, his face flushed with indignation. "Your Grace, this is unthinkable! No omega has ever sullied this council chamber. It's a violation of our sacred order."

Jimin's spine stiffened at the insult and the fire in his chest burned hotter. His eyes snapped to Lord Soo. "I seem to recall my mother and I standing in this very chamber when your lords cowered before the king's advancing army. None of you objected to our presence then."

The chamber descended into a hush. From the head of the table came a laugh, dark and rich and dangerous. Jungkook's amusement seemed to coil through the room, silencing even the most brash of lords. He didn't even acknowledge the councilmen's objections as he stood and walked towards Jimin. Then without warning, Jungkook scooped him up in his arms and settled into his chair, pulling Jimin onto his lap.

"Now," he said, his voice low enough for Jimin's ears alone, "—let them choke on their traditions." Then, louder, with a note of mockery curling around his words, he addressed the council. "Gentlemen, by all means, proceed. Speak of your farmers, your taxes, and all those you deem so vital to this kingdom."

Sunlight streamed unhindered through the chamber windows, its warmth doing little to dispel the cloying smell of parchment, stale sweat, and the musk of old men.

The murmur of voices that had momentarily dulled resumed with trepidation.

"My king," Lord Soo began. He cast a cautious glance at Jimin before continuing, "This decree of yours regarding the farmers... it jeopardises the kingdom's stability. Taxing the nobility further while reducing the levies on the peasants—it undermines the very foundation of your reign. Farmers and fishermen and blacksmiths are not the source of power—coin is."

Another lord chimed in, his tone sharper. "What precedent does this set, Your Grace? A king who favours peasants over his lords? The nobility will see it as a betrayal. And when they do, they will rebel."

Jimin shifted slightly, inadvertently drawing Jungkook closer. He stilled when he felt the heat of Jungkook's breath on his neck. A nose traced a line along his throat, a cheek brushed his skin, the faintest touch of lips lingered just shy of too much. Jimin's chest tightened, his thoughts scattering as his heart raced against his will.

"Are we to starve the kingdom's coffers dry for the sake of sentimentality?" Lord Soo pressed, emboldened by the chorus of agreement from the others.

"Or invite insurrection," Lord Huang added, his nose flaring. "You forget, my king, who put you on that throne. It wasn't the farmers or the rabble, it was us. The noble families. Without our acceptance of the bloodshed that marked your rise, the lesser houses would never have fallen in line."

Jimin's gaze wandered discreetly across the table, noting the faces gathered there. Most were familiar—lords of the old bloodlines who had served as council to Jimin's father and grandfather. But there were new faces, younger men, unfamiliar to Jimin, who sat with a

quiet confidence. These were Jungkook's men, he realised, placed strategically to counterbalance the influence of the old guard.

Sure enough, one of them spoke up. "The farmers are the backbone of this kingdom. Without them, the very estates you all cling to would crumble. The king's decree ensures their survival and, by extension, yours."

Jimin hadn't noticed Taehyung leaning against the wall. But he was in attendance as well. "You speak of rebellion, Lord Gyeong, yet you fail to see how your greed sows the seeds of discontent. The people follow those who give them hope. His Grace offers them that."

Lord Gyeong bristled, his face darkening with indignation.

"You upstarts think you know better than those who have ruled for decades!" Lord Soo snapped, his fist slamming onto the table. "The king's alliances with the lower classes will doom us all."

But Jungkook's attention had drifted entirely from the debate. His hand rested firmly on Jimin's waist, his thumb stroking idly over the silk of Jimin's robe. His other hand moved to tilt Jimin's chin slightly, exposing the soft curve of his neck. Jimin's breath stuttered as he felt Jungkook's nose press against his skin, inhaling deeply.

"Your Grace," Lord Huang bit out. "This is no time for distractions."

Jungkook's lips softened into a curve, though he didn't lift his head. "Do continue, Lord Huang. Your grievances are noted."

But the lords had begun to falter, their arguments stumbling. Jungkook's attention on Jimin was excessive now, his hands roaming with deliberate slowness, tugging at the ties of Jimin's robes.

Jimin's face grew hot, his flush spreading deeper as he felt his body surrender under Jungkook's touch. He willed himself to remain still, to block out the council's gaze and the shame curling in his chest, but every movement of Jungkook's hands made it harder to focus. And then slowly, the alpha pushed aside the folds of Jimin's robe, exposing his chest to the cool air and his wandering touch. When Jungkook's fingers brushed over his nipples, Jimin arched with a shuddering moan.

A smile played at the corners of Jungkook's mouth, his satisfaction palpable. Some of the lords stared, others coughed awkwardly. All of them looked embarrassed and discomposed.

"Perhaps the lords of this council need a reminder. Of where your loyalty lies. Of who holds the power in this room."

He tugged at the laces of his trousers and lifted the hem of Jimin's robe, exposing more of him with each passing moment.

"Put your legs up, Omega"

Jimin's breath hitched, his eyes welling with tears. The bond pulsed, wanting to be claimed, wanting to please. "Alpha—"

"Put your feet on the chair, now."

Jimin obeyed, his ample skirt spreading wide to reveal his slim legs and the mess of slick coating his thighs. The heavy sweetness of jasmine coated the air, clinging to his breath. Jungkook's hand cupped his cheeks, gathering the wetness before he pressed his cockhead forward. And with a single, deliberate push, he lowered Jimin down, sinking him completely onto his cock.

Jimin squeezed his eyes shut, his moans unfurling as soft as a lullaby. His fingers clutched tightly at Jungkook's forearm, his parted lips trembling.

"You speak of rebellion," Jungkook continued, his tone almost lazy, though the dangerous edge beneath it was unmistakable. "But rebellion is born of weakness. And weakness has no place here."

His arm draped around Jimin's waist, holding him close, while his other hand spread Jimin's legs further apart. All he was inhaling was the scent directly from Jimin's neck. From there, in front of everyone, he fucked into Jimin, snapping his hips up hard and fast. The chair creaked under their weight.

Jimin whined and keened, throwing his head back to press his face into the alpha's neck. He wanted to be smothered by his smoky cedar scent, to feel it surround him completely. He could feel the alpha's cock strike his very core, dragging along his walls, trailing his seed, planting it in his womb. His body tensed, every part of him alive with longing and ache. Each touch, each brush of skin against skin, burned into him a fire that wouldn't die.

His vision swam as the weight of Jungkook's power pressed against him. He could feel the alpha's heartbeat against his back, strong and steady, as if mocking the chaos in his own chest. There was no denying the way Jungkook commanded not just him, but the room itself, without a word. The council might bristle and whisper, but they were powerless under the sheer force of his will.

"This is what loyalty looks like—obedient, pliant, and mine."

Jimin's cheeks burned as the words settled over the room. His gaze darted toward the faces of the lords, but none dared speak. They only watched. They watched *him*.

"Alpha," Jimin moaned.

"You've wasted enough of my time. Leave. Now."

The lords rose like men fleeing a battlefield, their stiff bows and clipped steps a poor mask for their disquiet. The door closed with a low groan, leaving Jimin alone with his mate, his every nerve attuned to the man who had so thoroughly dismantled him in public.

14.

The following day, he received another note from his mother. The weight of her judgment practically bled through her elegant script.

Have you no shame? To allow yourself to be debased so publicly, to cry out like some common harlot in the king's arms before the council no less. Is this what you have become? A mere pawn in his games of power, sacrificing your dignity for his whims?

Our family is whispered about in every corner of the court. You disgrace yourself, and by extension, our name. Do not forget where you come from, Jimin, or the honour you still owe to your bloodline and your house.

15.

It was a cold, bitter afternoon when Jimin found himself alone with his mother once more. The curtains were drawn tight, the air smelling faintly of incense and overbrewed tea. Both inside and outside the door, servants stood like silent sentinels, ensuring their conversation remained private.

His mother sat across from him, her back straight, hands folded neatly in her lap. Jimin's fingers tightened around the teacup in his hands.

"You're playing a dangerous game."

"I don't understand what you mean, Mother."

She sighed. "Don't mistake his attention for anything but strategy. He mated you to secure his power. You're a tool, Jimin, a means to an end."

He stared down at his neglected drink. "I know that."

"Do you? Because you seem far too comfortable in his presence. Have you forgotten why you're here? Or does his touch make you forget everything I taught you?"

The notion stung sharper than he expected. Jimin forced himself to look up. "Of course I haven't forgotten."

"Then stop acting like a fool," she snapped. "The bastard doesn't care for you, not in the way you think. He wants your obedience, your submission. Nothing more."

Jimin's chest felt as though it were caving in. How could he possibly begin to describe the disarray Jungkook's presence had caused him? The betrayal of his own body, drawn to the man he should despise.

"What became of the rebel you were supposed to meet?" she asked abruptly, as if the very question irritated her.

"I think that plan has fallen through," Jimin admitted.

His mother's lips pursed, her disapproval palpable. "It was a simple task, Jimin, and even that slips through your grasp." She shook her head. "Meanwhile, our new king continues to dismantle everything this kingdom was built upon. Ignoring the noble families, handing out coin and bread like he's running a charity. The people should respect the crown, not pity it."

Jimin stayed quiet, knowing she would launch into another tirade.

"And as for me," she continued, her indignation rising. "I've been deliberately confined to the west wing. He denies me a place in matters of state, bars me from the ministers, even the noble houses. As if I'm some… *relic* to be discarded."

“No one thinks that—”

“And why hasn’t my own son come to see me sooner? Why am I forced to send notes through servants like a prisoner?”

Jimin set his cup down on the table with a soft clink. “I’ve been kept in my chambers too, Mother,” he replied carefully. “It’s not as if I’ve had the freedom to come and go.”

His mother scoffed. “And you’ve just accepted that? Have you no pride left?”

“I haven’t accepted it,” Jimin said firmly. “But surely you must have foreseen this. Did you really think Jungkook would let either of us roam the castle as we pleased?”

“I know enough. You’ve grown lax, Jimin. Had I not urged you to meet with the rebels, you wouldn’t have gone yourself.”

He had risked his life to run that errand for her, but Jimin refused to let her see the frustration bubbling beneath his calm. “And what would you have me do?” he asked. “March into the throne room and demand my rights? You and I both know that wouldn’t end well. He is not to me as Father was to you.”

The mention of his father cast a shadow over the room. The queen’s expression darkened, her shoulders stiffening as though she’d swallowed a sour lemon. “Your father protected this kingdom. He kept order. And now this ungrateful bastard threatens to destroy it all with his reckless ideas.”

“Why did Father kill his family?” The question slipped out before he could stop himself. “What did they do that was so terrible?”

The queen froze, her eyes widening for the briefest moment. “That is none of your concern. Your father did what was necessary to preserve the crown.”

Jimin stared at her. Then he stood up and walked to the corner of the hearth. The fire within it flickered weakly. He reached out, nudging a log with the toe of his boot, before turning back to the room.

“Everyone, leave us. I wish to speak with my mother alone.”

The servants exchanged uncertain glances but didn’t hesitate. One by one, they shuffled out of the room.

The moment the latch clicked, Jimin faced his mother. “Necessary? You accused me of being a fool, Mother, and perhaps I am one. But explain to me please, how does a family once loyal to the crown fall from favour so swiftly, so utterly, that not only their titles but their very bloodline is erased? And Jungkook is not even related to them, he was adopted, wasn’t he? Then why did his hatred burn so fiercely? Why did he raise his sword against our family with such wrath?”

He paused, the warmth of the fire brushing his skin. “None of it makes sense. And I don’t believe it to be mere coincidence.”

For a long moment, she said nothing. The silence stretched between them, thick with secrets and half-truths, until it felt as though the room itself might crack under the weight of unspoken answers. “They committed treason,” she said finally. “That’s all you need to know.”

“That’s not enough, Mother!” Jimin’s voice rose. “I’m mated to this alpha. Our vows were exchanged before the gods—”

“Oh, the alpha who fucks you like a slut? Because that’s what you are, Jimin, to the eyes of everyone in this castle. The bastard’s slut. And don’t try to tell me you don’t enjoy it.” The queen’s eyes flared with anger, her face flushed. She pushed herself to her feet, her hands clenched. “Where have I gone wrong with you, Jimin? Where did I fail you?! I don’t even know. As for your father, he did what was necessary to preserve the kingdom. Now I beg of you, stop asking these foolish questions!”

Her words struck Jimin like a dagger, twisting deep with every syllable. Shame and fury roared to life inside him, clashing in a maelstrom that left him hollow and trembling. It wasn’t just her condemnation, it was the finality in her voice, as if she had already disowned him in her heart. The room blurred, his vision swimming with unshed tears. But before he could summon the strength to respond, the chamber doors slammed open. His heart lurched as Jungkook entered. He wore no crown, no robes of state, yet the air seemed to bend to his authority.

“Am I interrupting?” He stopped just inside the room, his eyes lingering on Jimin before shifting to the queen. “I couldn’t help but hear raised voices. I trust everything is well?”

“You overstep, Your Majesty,” the queen said coldly. “This is a private conversation.”

“Private? In my castle?” Jungkook’s lips curved into a faint smile, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “You’re mistaken.”

Jimin watched the exchange as if from outside his own body. He was numb, detached. But something in him intuitively loosened as Jungkook stepped closer, his gaze never leaving him.

“You’ve had enough of his time,” Jungkook said. “Leave us.”

The queen bristled. “I am his *mother*—”

“And I am his king,” Jungkook interrupted, cutting through her protest like a blade. “You’ve said what you came to say. Now go.”

For a moment, it seemed as if she might defy him, but then she turned sharply on her heel, her skirts rustling as she left the room. The door closed behind her with a heavy crash, and the silence that followed was deafening.

“Have you eaten?”

Jimin blinked, startled. “I—sorry?”

“I asked if you’ve eaten.”

Jimin’s cheeks flushed and he ran his hands down his robes. “No, I haven’t.”

Jungkook nodded. “Then we will dine together.” He turned to his manservant, who hovered at the door. “Tell the kitchen to prepare our lunch. Bring it here.”

Long after the servant left, Jungkook still did not speak a word. Jimin could feel the alpha’s eyes on him, watching him like a predator. He sat in anxious silence, waiting for the inevitable question about his argument with his mother. His mind raced, crafting lies and excuses, hoping one would be enough to quell the alpha’s curiosity.

“Have the rains ever caused trouble in the southern fields?”

Jimin frowned. “I believe so, yes.”

“Flooding?” Jungkook asked.

“Yes.”

“What had been done to secure their crops in the past years?”

“I—I don’t know.” Jimin hesitated. “I was never told, nor asked to give an opinion.”

Before he could say more, the door creaked open and the servant entered bearing trays of food. The scent of hearty stew and freshly baked bread filled the air, drawing Jimin’s attention instantly.

“Your meal, Your Grace,” the servant said, bowing low as he placed one tray in front of Jungkook, and another before Jimin.

Jungkook didn’t look away from Jimin. With a casual wave of his hand, he dismissed his man. “See to it we’re not disturbed. Wait outside.”

The servant bowed again and exited.

The tempting scent of the food stirred Jimin’s hunger, but his nerves kept him tense. He reached for the spoon, his grip faltering slightly as he scooped the stew. Before he could put it in his mouth though, the alpha stopped him.

“Remove your robes.”

Jimin froze, the spoon lingering just above his mouth. His mind was blank. The order took root in his chest, but he knew better than to protest. Jungkook’s eyes locked on him, pinning him in place. He set the spoon down slowly, hands fumbling as he began to pull at the ties of his robe. The fabric rustled softly as he peeled it from his shoulders. Then he stopped.

“All of it, take it off.”

A flush bloomed across Jimin's skin, but he didn't dare disobey. He stripped the robe from his body and let it fall to the floor in a quiet heap. The chill of the room brushed against his body. His nipples pebbled, his stomach coiled. He bit back a shiver and glanced at the alpha through his lashes.

Jungkook leaned back in his chair, his gaze fixed on Jimin with the intensity of someone luxuriating in a rare sight. Jimin could feel the weight of his own nakedness, acutely aware of how exposed and vulnerable he was. The starkness of his bare skin was somehow more humiliating with each passing moment. He waited for the next command, his breath shallow, his body poised.

Jungkook's eyes swept over Jimin from head to toe, before he finally nodded, almost to himself. "Eat."

16.

When Jimin first presented, the castle bells tolled. Their ringing carried through the hills and valleys, summoning villagers from their homes and nobles from their keeps. The celebrations that followed were grander than any of his brothers' presentations. An alpha heir was expected, a duty fulfilled. But an omega heir? That was destiny smiling upon their house.

The feast lasted for weeks. Bards sang songs of Jimin's beauty, of his power to unite kingdoms with a single vow. Nobles and princes from across the lands arrived, their carriages forming winding lines at the castle gates. The court buzzed with intrigue, each lord and lady eager for a glimpse of him. And Jimin had been paraded before them all, his porcelain complexion and luminous eyes the subject of awed whispers.

He would never forget the way his chest swelled with pride as the queen explained it to him.

"An omega heir is far more than a gift. He is the thread that weaves alliances, the key to the future. Here, it is not armies that win wars, but the ties forged by omegas. And you, my son, are the most beautiful of them all. With you, we will gain alliances that no army can ever defeat. Peace, power, prosperity—they will all bow before you."

Jimin had smiled then, young and impressionable, basking in her praise. But his mating to Jungkook had nothing to do with alliances or treaties. No noble hall awaited his choice, no kingdom prospered from their bond.

It was no wonder the queen hated him so.

17.

The courtyard buzzed with the rhythmic clash of swords. And beyond that, the barked orders of commanders drilling their men.

Eyes followed Jimin—some hidden, others brazen. He knew Jungkook had men watching his every move. His mother undoubtedly had her spies too. But there were others, lingering on the edges of the training yard, their curiosity unguarded. Their stares burned and Jimin knew why. They'd seen the king take him, reduce him to moans and gasps before the court. Now they watched, wondering if there would be more to see.

He tried to ignore them, focusing instead on the commotion ahead. Jungkook stood in the centre of the yard, stripped to the waist, his chest gleaming with sweat under the rising sun. His movements were fluid and precise as he sparred against his men—not one, but ten at once. The soldiers circled him, each lunging in turn, and yet Jungkook was unstoppable. His sword struck with brutal force, his footwork leaving no room for error. A final swing of his blade sent the last man tumbling to the dirt.

Jimin's stomach twisted. A flush crept up his neck that he couldn't blame on the sun. The sight of Jungkook like this, sweat-slicked and victorious, stirred something deep in him. A pulse of heat flared in his belly, rising and spreading despite his best efforts to fight it. He turned sharply. His feet carried him away from the yard and toward the godswood, where the towering trees might grant him some reprieve.

The air cooled as he entered the sacred grove, the dense canopy muting the noise of the courtyard. He knelt before the oldest tree and pressed his hands together in prayer. His head bowed, his whispered words tumbling out. A plea for his brothers. A plea for his father. For the dead who lingered in his memory.

But even as he prayed, he could still see Jungkook. His thick corded muscles, the sweat dripping down his temples. The scars on his body and the curve of his lips and the sparse hair that trailed down to his groin. Jimin's body responded before his mind could, leaking slick down his thighs.

And then the scent of damp bark and moss was abruptly overpowered by something richer. Something heady and unmistakable.

"You pray with such fervour," the deep timbre of Jungkook's voice spilled into leaves and bushes and between the tall trees. "I wonder, what is it for?"

Jimin froze, his hands clenching together. "I pray for my father and brothers. The men you murdered."

"You speak of them as though they were saints." His boots crunched softly against the undergrowth as he moved closer. "Your father's greed bled villages dry, and your brothers followed in his footsteps. Do you mourn them even then?"

Jimin turned quickly, glaring up at him. “Yes, I do. They were good men, and you’ve done far worse—conquered, killed, tortured—”

Jungkook’s hand shot out, wrapping around Jimin’s arm and yanking him to his feet. The movement was so sudden, so forceful, that Jimin stumbled against him, his hands landing on Jungkook’s chest. He was warm, the steady thrum of his heartbeat under Jimin’s palms far too intimate.

“Even so,” Jungkook murmured, his dark eyes boring into Jimin’s, “—you tremble when I touch you. Tell me Omega, do you pray for the dead? Or is it yourself you beg the gods to forgive, for what you feel when you look at me?”

Jimin’s breath caught, his words tangled in his throat. “You speak in twists and lies.”

“Call it lies if it helps you sleep.” Jungkook’s grip on his arm loosened, but only so he could trace his knuckles down Jimin’s wrist. “But you know the truth as much as I do. You think of it. You crave it. My hands on your thighs. My tongue on your neck. My cock in your—”

Jimin jerked back as if burned, but Jungkook caught him again, his hand slipping to the small of Jimin’s back. He pressed their bodies flush, his lips brushing dangerously close to Jimin’s ear.

“I saw you watching me in the courtyard. You couldn’t look away, could you? Not when I had ten men against me, not when they fell, one after the other. And now, here you are, running to the gods to save you from the fire I’ve set inside you.”

“You’re wrong,” Jimin bit out.

“You’re a lovely little thing when you lie.” Jungkook leaned back just enough to catch Jimin’s gaze, his lips curving imperceptibly. “Did you know? The way your cheeks flush and your lips quiver.” His hand dipped lower, prodding just above the curve of Jimin’s hip, teasingly close.

“Stop—”

“Say it like you mean it,” Jungkook murmured, his lips brushing over Jimin’s.

He pressed his hands against Jungkook’s chest to shove him away. Instead, his fingers curled into the damp fabric of his tunic.

“Here’s another truth for you. I want to fuck you all the time. Tell me this sweetness, this slick, is mine alone. Tell me this body belongs to me.”

Jimin didn’t answer, but his silence appeared enough. Jungkook’s mouth descended on Jimin’s, his lips hot and insistent. The first touch was sharp. Teeth scraped over Jimin’s lower lip, before giving way to the wet heat of Jungkook’s tongue sliding past his defences. He licked and tasted every corner as if to memorise Jimin from the inside out. Saliva pooled at the corners of Jimin’s lips, his breath turning stale.

Jungkook's exhales ghosted over his face. He tilted Jimin's head, deepening the kiss with a sharp tug at the back of Jimin's neck. The sound of it was lewd, so wet and needy. Jimin let out a muffled whine when Jungkook's teeth found his lip again. Jungkook bit and pulled, only to soothe the sting with a searing press of his tongue.

Jimin's legs shook, his scent bloomed like a flower in the heat of summer. Slick eased down his hole to stain his robes. The intensity of Jungkook's cedar almost knocked the air from his lungs. Only the weight of his hands on Jimin's waist kept him grounded as everything else spun out of control. Jimin instinctively arched into him. The bond wrapped around them, leaving him pliant, aching, wanting.

When Jungkook pulled away, a faint thread of saliva stretched between them. Jimin panted, his lips swollen and red, his chest heaving as Jungkook's dark, feral eyes bore into him. And then, with a hum, Jungkook leaned back in, dragging Jimin back under like a wave swallowing the shore. It was only when their bodies collided, when Jimin felt the pressure of Jungkook's swollen cock against his hips, that he regained his senses.

He broke away with a gasp. "Stop! You have to stop! You—you killed my family."

"And your father," Jungkook frowned, his grip tightening, "—was a man who preyed on the weak and called it power. Don't mourn him. Don't waste your prayers on him."

Jimin's lips eased apart, but no words came. Jungkook's thumb brushed over his jaw, tilting his head back.

"Save your prayers for something worth begging for, Park Jimin," he said, softer now. "Because I will take everything else you offer."

Jimin's breaths came fast and shallow as Jungkook's hands skimmed down the curve of his back. Then, abruptly, he was spun around to face the tree. A firm palm pressed between his shoulder blades, guiding him forward until his chest met the coarse surface of the bark. The heat in his body surged, a wildfire barely contained.

Behind him, Jungkook's hands roamed over his hips, his fingers curling possessively.

"Spread," Jungkook murmured. When Jimin didn't move, he used his knee to nudge Jimin's legs apart. The clink of metal followed, then the whisper of fabric shifting. Jungkook pressed his heavy cock along Jimin's backside, his chest flush against Jimin's back.

"My own pretty omega," he growled.

Jimin's heart raced, his pulse loud in his ears. But it wasn't loud enough to drown out the faint clip of horse hooves somewhere in the distance. The noise should have pulled him back to reality, but he stood rooted in place, trapped in the haze of shock and a hunger that grew with every breath. His mind faltered, slipping away from reason, and all he could think, all he could want, was to surrender himself to his alpha.

Jungkook's hand slid to the small of his back, lower to his thighs, the bend of his knees. He gathered the hem of Jimin's robes, the fabric sliding upward as his knuckles traced the bare,

tender flesh of his legs. He left a trail of goosebumps, catching the warmth of slick. Jungkook dragged his hand through the front, bunching up more fabric. He huddled closer and pressed the blunt head of his cock against Jimin's entrance.

And then Jungkook breached him in one quick thrust.

Jimin's head fell forward, a broken moan spilling from his lips as he felt the stretch. His fingers dug into the rough edge of the splintered tree, desperate for something to hold onto.

"Alpha—"

"Shh," Jungkook soothed. His free hand slid up to cradle Jimin's neck, tipping his head back to capture his lips with tongue and teeth.

The kiss was as rough as the way Jungkook moved inside him. Jimin could taste the heat of him, feel the scrape of his teeth. Jungkook carved his cock along his slick wet walls, again and again, drawing out and plunging in. He fucked fast and rough, driving Jimin harder against the tree, the bark snagging and tearing at the delicate fabric of his swirling robes.

Jimin moaned and whined into the kiss, his body arching instinctively to take Jungkook deeper. His knees bent just a fraction more. Every time Jungkook drove into him, he struck something so devastatingly deep, it sent waves of molten pleasure coursing through Jimin's entire frame. It spread from his belly, sharp and hot, all the way to the tips of his fingers.

"Jimin—Park Jimin," Jungkook groaned against his lips, pulling back just enough to drink in Jimin's flushed face. "The son of a murderer, the spawn of my enemy." He slipped his finger into the corner of Jimin's mouth and played with his tongue. "How do you fit my cock so perfectly? Like you were made for me."

Jimin's lips parted, but whatever response he tried to form dissolved into a sharp cry as Jungkook thrust particularly hard. The slap of their bodies meeting was obscene, the wetness between them adding to a lewd symphony of sounds.

The distant hooves grew louder. Any moment now, Jimin expected to be found. "Someone—is coming—"

"And they would see you like this. Bent over for me, taking me so well. Does that scare you?"

"Then—then stop—"

Jungkook laughed and his hips snapped harder, pulling another cry from Jimin's lips. "Never. I'll never stop fucking you. I'd fuck you loose in front of your own mother. Just for her to see how hard my cock gets for you. How much your hole leaks for me."

Jungkook dragged his hand down Jimin's body, gripping his hip as he drove into him like a wild animal. Sweat dotted Jimin's upper lip. He tipped his head back, leaning onto Jungkook's shoulder, exposing the elegant curve of his neck.

“Tell me how my cock feels in you.”

Jimin shuddered.

“Tell me.”

“Good,” Jimin cried. “So good—so—ah—”

“Only good? Your pretty omega hole is better than good. So soft, so wet, so fucking tight,” Jungkook trailed off, voice rough. He press down on Jimin’s lower belly, making him feel the entire length of his cock inside. “Say it. Say you love my cock.”

He tried to muster the words. “I—”

“Say it,” Jungkook snapped, shoving his cock to the hilt and grinding against the flesh of Jimin’s ass. “Or I’ll drag your mother out by her hair to watch me fuck you. Say it, Jimin.”

“Love your cock,” Jimin finally sobbed. “Your cock feels so good—Alpha—”

“Fuck,” Jungkook hissed. His palm slid around Jimin’s waist, hugging him close. “The prettiest omega I’ve ever seen, and I can put my cock in you whenever I want.” He dragged his tongue over the line of Jimin’s throat.

Jimin’s scent filled the air, sweet and heady, and weaving around Jungkook’s cedar. He panted heavily, his thighs trembling with strain.

He heard a sharp gasp, the hurried scurry of footsteps retreating into the distance. And he knew, torrid stories would soon find their way into the ears of the servants and stable boys. Eventually, to his mother.

Tongues would wag to speak the truth, *Bent against a sacred tree before the gods, taking Jungkook’s hot, heavy cock up his ass.*

When Jimin felt Jungkook’s teeth graze his shoulder, the sharp sting sent him spiraling, his entire body locking up as his release ripped through him. When the final wave crested, Jungkook buried himself to the hilt, his groan vibrating against Jimin’s damp skin. The world tilted, spun, and collapsed into a singular, blinding sensation.

“You’re mine,” Jungkook whispered.

Breathless and undone, Jimin could only nod.

18.

As long as he had been a prince, the omega son of his father and mother, Jimin had lived a life untouched by the burdens of the throne.

His existence had been one of delicate indulgence, a careful curation of innocence. The affairs of the kingdom—the grain shortages, the cries for justice, the wars waged beyond the castle walls—were matters left to his brothers and father and the council of ministers who managed his kingdom. They carried the weight of the realm, while Jimin's world was confined to the quiet luxuries befitting his station.

His days were spent in the sun dappled alcoves of the castle, embroidering intricate patterns into silks, reciting prayers in the chapel, and pouring tea for his mother's court of simpering ladies. The people had always been a distant, faceless mass to him, their plight as intangible as the fairy tales whispered to him as a child.

He didn't know his father beyond the man who sat on the throne with a crown on his head. His alpha brother carried that same distance, all rigid strength and stoic duty. Only Seokjin with his gentle smile and patient kindness had ever truly seen him. It was Seokjin who brought him sweets from his visits to the town, who humoured his questions about the world outside the palace walls, who ruffled his hair when no one else dared to.

And so, Jimin had not questioned. He had not argued. He had obeyed.

"An omega must know his place," his mother had told him time and again. "You're a jewel of this family, my son, but a jewel must not strive to be a sword."

He had believed her. He had believed it all—the rules, the roles, the edicts that governed their lives. Until now.

Until Jungkook.

19.

As was becoming of a royal mating and wedding, delegates arrived from far corners of the land to express their felicitations.

Jimin stood among the glittering splendour of the hall. The weight of ceremony was a familiar burden, yet the arrival of the Solarans made it heavier still. They were a kingdom known for their hedonistic ways and sun-soaked decadence, bold as the spices they traded. And among them, Prince Tavian was an unwelcome reminder of a proposal Jimin had long declined.

When Tavian approached, his brown eyes glinted with the same unrelenting interest that had unsettled Jimin years ago.

“Prince Jimin, time has been kind to you. I daresay you’re even more enchanting than I remember.”

Jimin inclined his head. “Your kingdom honours us with your presence.”

“Oh, come now, Tavian, don’t scare him away before the feast even begins. It’s wonderful to see you again, Jimin. I’ve missed our conversations.”

Jimin smiled at Tavian’s sister. “And I you, Lady Arlissa. Perhaps we can steal a moment once these formalities are behind us.”

Her nature was light and untroubled, and free of Tavian’s unnerving intensity. She looped her arm through his and leaned closer, speaking low enough for only him to hear. “Rumour travels fast, even in Solara. They say your alpha is fierce. Has he been treating you well?”

Jimin’s gaze flickered instinctively towards Jungkook. The alpha stood apart from the mingling crowd. Though he maintained the pretence of casual observation, Jimin knew better. Jungkook’s dark eyes moved like a hunter’s, cataloguing every presence, every movement, every word. But they always returned to him.

“He’s certainly protective of you. And very handsome.”

Jimin forced a polite smile as heat rose to his cheeks. He knew Jungkook’s protection wasn’t entirely selfless. It was more about control than it was about care. But there was something disconcerting—and strangely comforting—about the way he lingered like an impervious shield.

Later, they wandered into his favoured garden. Shadows stretched long in the golden light, and Jimin noticed Taehyung lingering at a respectful distance, ever watchful.

Arlissa reclined on a stone bench, her silk drapery shimmering like water in the waning sun. Her bare shoulders gleamed and her laughter danced to the rustle of garden leaves.

“You should’ve come to Solara when Tavian proposed,” Arlissa teased, adjusting her gold anklet. “He was insufferable for months after your rejection. Wrote bad poetry, finished all our wine. Truly a tragedy for us all.”

Jimin couldn’t help but smile. “I think the rejection was the least of his tragedies.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. You’re quite the prize. Tavian’s mistake is thinking he could ever deserve you.”

The ease between them soothed Jimin, though her brother’s obsession with him hung over Jimin like a storm cloud. Arlissa seemed to sense it. “But he’s not what I wanted to speak to you about,” her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “Tell me, how is it with your alpha?”

Jimin raised his brows. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, the bond you share. You’re mated now, aren’t you? Surely, he fucks you.”

A flush crept up Jimin’s neck. He lowered his eyes, his fingers fidgeting with the hem of his sleeves. “I suppose… he takes me. Often.”

“And do you enjoy it?”

Jimin coughed. His cheeks reddened even more. “I do.”

“That’s good.” Arlissa’s smile softened. “Pleasure is important, after all. Not just for him, but for you as well.” She paused for a moment, raising her hand to block out the sun from her face. “Back home, we’re taught to understand our alphas. To please them not just with sex, but with our presence, with our touch, with how we give ourselves.”

“Please them?” he echoed, uncertain.

“Yes. With your body, your hands, your mouth. Submission is a skill. It’s not simply about obeying, it’s about understanding what he craves, and knowing how to offer it. How to make him need you in ways he can’t control. In turn, he’ll take care of you.”

“I’ve not thought about it like that,” Jimin admitted.

“I could show you, if you wish.” She looked at him slyly. “How to make him crumble at your feet.”

Jimin felt his pulse quicken. “How?”

“Here—” She got up, vacating her seat and pulling Jimin to his feet. “Sit or lie down, it doesn’t quite matter.”

Jimin sat and looked up at her. She placed her hands on his shoulders, before stepping astride his lap with an ease that made him blush.

“Sometimes,” she continued, “you must take control in ways they won’t expect. Pleasure them, yes, but let them feel your strength, your command. Make them see you as more than theirs. Make them know you hold their soul in your hands.”

Her hips shifted slightly as she leaned closer, her hands guiding his to rest on her waist. The heat of her body was startling. “When you straddle him, fit his cock into your hole. It will strike you deep, deeper than you have ever felt. Roll your hips like this.” She demonstrated, moving on top of him. “Forward and back. Circle when it pleases you. Let him feel it. Let him *need* it.”

Jimin’s cheeks burned, but his hands followed hers as she guided him. Her hair fell like a curtain around them as she tossed her head back. From the corner of his eye, he saw that Taehyung had crept closer, his arms folded, watching them with a quiet, unblinking stare.

“And when he responds,” she whispered, leaning down so her breath ghosted against his ear. “When his voice falters, his hands tremble—you will know. You’ll feel it in your bones.”

She straightened, stepping back with a final sweep of her hands down his arms. “Show him your fire, Jimin, let him burn for you. And that is how you’ll have him in the palm of your hand.”

20.

By the time they gathered for the feast, Jimin was several shades of hot and bothered. He knew he smelled sweeter, his cheeks redder, his lips fuller. As such, it was most inconvenient that he found himself seated across from Tavian, whose eyes never seemed to stray far. His comments were relentless, needling at Jimin with flirtatious undertones that grew bolder as the wine flowed.

“I’ll never forget that one summer in Solara. You spent the entire season locked away in the library, reading your precious books. And when I finally convinced you to join us in the gardens, you looked at me as if I had suggested death itself.”

“It was long enough that I don’t remember.”

“Ah, but I do. So clearly in fact, I remember what you were reading.” He looked amused. “A Distant Melody, wasn’t it? Something about a musician whose only audience was the stars above. You always had an eye for the quieter things in life.”

Jimin glanced around the table, noting that Arlissa kept casting her brother increasingly annoyed looks. “Yes, well, I only read what interested me.”

Tavian’s smirk deepened. “And now, you’ve blossomed into a prince who can’t seem to escape attention. Funny how things change. It’s a shame Solara wasn’t granted the honour of keeping such a treasure. You’d have been cherished beyond measure in our court.”

Jimin stiffened, nearly dropping his cutlery. The insult was veiled, but it was an insult nonetheless.

“Of course,” Tavian continued, swirling his goblet of wine, “—some alphas might not know how to truly value such beauty. They’re blinded by their own... brutish nature.” His eyes flickered towards Jungkook. “It must be exhausting, trying to tame such a beast.”

“A beast barely scratches the surface of who you are, Tavian,” Arlissa remarked from across the table. “The trail of broken hearts you leave behind speaks for itself.”

The table erupted in light laughter. Jimin felt a cold prickle of discomfort crawl up his spine.

“Sister, you jest. Prince Jimin knows whom I speak of.”

“I rather think my actions are of my own choosing, Prince Tavian.”

“Ah, but I only observe, my dear prince. And what I see is wasted potential.”

“Mind your tongue,” Jungkook’s voice cut through the din.

The laughter and chatter in the hall ceased instantly. All eyes turned to Jungkook who sat unmoving, his expression carved from stone.

If anything, Tavian seemed emboldened by the attention. “I meant no offense, my lord,” he said, though his words danced on the edge of mockery. “I merely admire what is so plainly —”

Jungkook stood abruptly, silencing Tavian mid-sentence. He circled the table, moving behind Jimin like a shadow before halting behind Tavian. In an eye blink, he snatched the knife from Tavian’s plate and slammed it into the table, the steel biting into flesh and wood and pinning Tavian’s hand in place.

Tavian’s eyes went wide in shock, his arrogant smirk crumbling as he let out a sharp cry. Blood quickly seeped from the wound, soaking the fabric of his sleeve. His confidence seemed to bleed out just as fast as the crimson stain spread.

“If you value your tongue, you’ll hold it,” Jungkook growled. “Another word, and I’ll cut off your cock and feed it to you.”

The room was deathly silent, the tension so thick it was suffocating. Jimin’s heart raced, equal parts dismayed and fearful.

“I—I meant no harm. Forgive me, Your Grace. Your Highness.”

Jungkook yanked the knife free. Blood dripped onto the table as Tavian cradled his injured hand. Without sparing him another glance, Jungkook turned to the guards stationed at the edge of the hall. “Escort him out. I don’t want to see his face again.”

The guards moved swiftly, dragging Tavian from his seat. His protests were weak, drowned out by the murmurs that rippled through the stunned delegates. Arlissa sprang to her feet, hurrying after her brother, and a few others followed suit. The room descended into chaos. Amidst it all, Jungkook’s eyes found Jimin’s.

For a brief, unsettling moment, the ferocity in his gaze softened.

21.

Jimin stood over the balustrade overlooking the torchlit courtyard. Traces of unrest drifted upwards in whispers and murmurs. He wrapped his arms around himself, fighting a coldness that was more than skin deep.

The bond pulsed insistently. Jungkook's emotions pressed at the corners of his mind like a storm battering distant shores. Dark and roiling fury threatened to spill over, though it was muted now. Jimin shuddered. It wasn't just Jungkook's anger he felt, it was the thrill beneath it. A savage satisfaction that set Jimin's teeth on edge.

He closed his eyes, trying to shut it out, but the bond refused to release him. It demanded he feel, demanded he remember the rush of Jungkook's triumph as Tavian's blood spilled across the table.

His mother's words of caution washed over him. She'd called Jungkook dangerous, a bastard. She said he was only using Jimin to serve his ambitions. He'd convinced himself that she couldn't possibly understand that there was something deeper between them, something he couldn't put to words. It was in the way his body called out to Jungkook, in the way the storm in his mind stilled the moment Jungkook's hands found him.

But tonight, he'd seen the truth she had warned him of. Jungkook wasn't just dangerous to others, he was dangerous to Jimin. Not because he had hurt him, but because Jimin had let himself believe he wouldn't. He had been swept up in the pull of the bond, in the heat of Jungkook's presence, until it blinded him to the reality of who—what—he was.

The bond pulsed again, and Jimin flinched. This time, it wasn't anger or satisfaction he felt. It was a flicker of something softer, concern, maybe. Regret.

"No," Jimin whispered. He couldn't trust what the bond showed him. It was too easy to be drawn in, to mistake instinct for something more.

He opened his eyes, staring out at the dark horizon. Jungkook was still in the hall, likely dealing with the fallout of his actions. Jimin could imagine him now, standing tall and unrepentant, the weight of his brutality worn as easily as his cloak.

Jimin felt the bond tug at him again.

"Don't be a fool, Jimin. Don't be a fool, twice."

Jungkook wasn't a man who could be tamed. And Jimin, for all his pride and stubbornness, wasn't sure he had the strength to turn away.

22.

The court ladies chattered endlessly about fabrics and flirtations, the latest gossip passed on as though an open secret. Jimin sat among them, nodding politely as the words spilled around him like a stream he had no intention of wading into.

Every gesture and expression was deliberate. His was a performance that kept him anchored in their company and away from the one person who made his pulse race and his nerves fray.

“Did you see Lady Eun’s gown at the banquet?” One lady trilled. “The embroidery was exquisite, though perhaps a touch garish.”

“Her taste has always been questionable,” another chimed in, eliciting a round of subdued giggles.

Jimin murmured something agreeable, the corners of his mouth twitching into a faint smile, but his mind was miles away. He wasn’t here because he cared for their gossip or their empty praise. He was here because it was safe. The court ladies rarely ventured beyond their narrow sphere of intrigue, and as long as he kept them entertained, he could avoid crossing paths with Jungkook.

It wasn’t that he hated Jungkook. Hate required engagement, and Jimin had retreated too far into himself for that. Ever since that dreadful day, he had avoided Jungkook’s eyes, spoken only when directly addressed, and crafted excuses about being tied up in one matter or another so polished they should have gone unnoticed. But instead of diverting the alpha’s gaze, his careful avoidance rather had the opposite effect.

The weight of Jungkook’s attention was unbearable, like standing under a relentless sun. And worse, his irritation with Jimin’s antics seemed to grow with each passing day, simmering beneath the surface like a pot ready to boil over.

The gravity of it gnawed at him now, even in the ladies’ company.

“Your Highness,” Lady Hana said, turning to him with a quiet sigh. “You’ve hardly said a word all afternoon. Are you well?”

Jimin blinked, then nodded quickly. “Of course. Forgive me, I was lost in thought.”

“Oh? What about?”

“Nothing of consequence, my lady. Just correspondences I should attend to.”

A murmur of approval followed, the kind reserved for answers that neither satisfied nor offended.

“You’re far too serious, Your Highness.” Lady Yura tucked a stray curl behind her ear. “Surely you must take time for simpler pleasures. Tell us—have you no interest in the upcoming harvest festival? Or perhaps some… other diversions?”

He knew well enough what she was asking for, but he wouldn't allow himself to be fodder for their amusement. "No," he said, setting his cup down. "Nothing of the sort."

When it became clear that Jimin wasn't going to indulge them, their attention shifted back to one another. He glanced toward the window, where the sun hung heavy in the sky.

His thoughts darkened as he considered his mother. He couldn't talk to her, not anymore. Every interaction with her was another reminder of her disapproval, her biting remarks, her disappointment. It made his heart heavy how lonely he felt. She was all he had left, yet now it felt as if they were worlds apart, separated by chasm that felt impossible to bridge.

He knew he couldn't keep hiding like this forever.

Sooner or later, the alpha would come for him.

23.

Jimin stepped into his chambers with caution. The door had been partly open, and through the crack, he glimpsed the flicker of dim candlelight spilling across the floor.

Jungkook was slumped in a chair with a goblet of wine dangling from his fingers. The bottle sat uncorked on the table beside him, half-empty. His dark gaze snapped to Jimin the moment he entered.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

Jimin squared his shoulders. “I haven’t.”

Jungkook scoffed, the sound laced with disdain. “Liar.”

He pushed himself to his feet. Though the wine had clearly dulled his edges, there was still a sharpness to the way he moved.

“You come in here like a shadow, quiet and careful like I might bite,” Jungkook muttered, taking a step toward him. “Are you afraid of me?”

“No.”

“You think I don’t see it? The way you flinch. The way you look at me now, like I’m unsalvageable. A beast too far gone.”

“I’ve not thought that,” Jimin said, lying through his teeth.

“Haven’t you?” Jungkook stepped even closer, almost crowding Jimin against the wall. “You think I’d kill and kill—” His lips curled into a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “That I’d kill even you.”

“You wouldn’t,” Jimin said, quieter this time.

Jungkook’s smile faltered. A wisp of something reckless flashed in his eyes. Then it was gone, masked by the wine’s haze and his simmering anger. “You don’t know that. You don’t know me.”

“I know enough.”

“Do you? Then why are you still here?”

“Because—” Jimin frowned. “Because…”

“Because you need my cock.” Jungkook murmured at his temple, so close Jimin felt his breath wash over his face. “Because you want it so badly, you’d cry and beg and lose yourself just to feel it inside you.”

Jungkook leaned in closer, his cedar dark and heady, invading every corner of Jimin’s senses.

“You’re scared,” Jungkook whispered, his tone dipping into something almost tender. “Not because I’m dangerous, but because you know I’m right. That terrifies you, doesn’t it? How much you’d let me take from you. How much you’d give.”

Jimin’s heart pounded. His body was frozen, but his hand twitched instinctively. The urge to retrieve the dagger he’d concealed beneath his mattress overtook him. He didn’t trust the wild gleam in Jungkook’s eyes, the way the wine seemed to leave him unfettered.

Jungkook’s hand came up, brushing over Jimin’s jaw, turning his chin just slightly. “You don’t know if I’ll kiss you or if I’ll hurt you. And that’s why you can’t breathe right now.”

Jimin jerked his head away, his pulse hammering.

The alpha inclined his head, a humourless chuckle escaping his lips. “Good,” he murmured, stepping back at last. “Maybe you’re starting to understand.”

Then he abruptly turned and strode towards the door. “Follow me.”

Jimin stared at the empty space where Jungkook had just been. A knot of confusion and panic tightened in his chest. He stalled for only a moment before he darted to his bed. The dagger sat exactly where he’d left it, its blade still as sharp, its edge still as cold. He snatched it and tucked it securely beneath the folds of his robe.

The air felt too thick, too charged, as he followed Jungkook into the dim corridor, his every nerve screaming at him to tread carefully. A little while later, he realised he was being led to the bath chambers. Heat and steam clogged his nose as he crossed the threshold, just in time to see Jungkook shed his cloak. The alpha’s hands moved to the laces of his trousers next.

“Wait—” Jimin nearly tripped on his feet. “What are you doing?”

“Bathing,” Jungkook replied, shedding his bottoms and tugging his tunic over his head. His movements were unhurried, composed, as though daring Jimin to look away. His cock swung between his thighs, his balls heavy and taut as he stepped into the steaming pool. He turned to face Jimin, the water lapping at his waist. “Wash me, Omega.”

Jimin blinked, unsure if he had misheard. “What?”

Jungkook’s gaze held him, sharp as steel. “Your king orders that you wash him. Must I explain further?”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m still giving you an order. What’s the matter? Afraid to touch me?”

Jimin frowned. He was unaccustomed to such tasks, since it was always his maids who attended to him. Still, he crossed the chamber and retrieved a washcloth and a small bottle of oil. When he returned to the pool, Jungkook was reclining against the edge, arms draped over the tiled rim with an ease that floundered Jimin. He watched from behind as Jungkook chugged down more wine.

He seemed vulnerable somehow. But dangerous. So dangerous.

“Don’t make me wait, Omega.”

He moved to the edge of the bath and sank to his knees. Sweat pooled under his garments, the humidity clinging to every part of him. With a steadying breath, he started with Jungkook’s hands. His own fingers moved fluidly, applying the oil before scrubbing in slow strokes.

From the alpha’s calloused fingers to the strong curve of his wrist, Jimin worked upwards, tracing the sinew of his forearm, the slope of his shoulder, and the hollow beneath it. The brush of his fingers against the thatch of hair in the alpha’s underarm made him falter. He swallowed the saliva pooling in his mouth. Sandalwood and cedar mingled with the steam and quiet ripple of water.

“When you’re like this,” Jungkook murmured, watching him intently. “I could pretend you cared.”

A rush of warmth bloomed across Jimin’s cheeks. “Why would you pretend?”

“I don’t know,” Jungkook replied after a moment. He reached for the wine with an unhurried grace, lifting the bottle to his lips and drinking deeply.

This was the most unguarded Jimin had ever seen him. His face was rosy with alcohol, and his pupils were dark and wide. His hands seemed to have lost their strength as Jimin scrubbed him. The alpha let out a sigh, tilting his head back on the edge of the pool. Jimin couldn’t help but think how easy it would be to end it all right now, with the alpha so defenceless.

His emotions swirled around him, his every muscle coiled tight. He worked the washcloth, his focus narrowing to the slick sheen of water on skin, the rivulets that ran down the hollow of Jungkook’s throat and over his chest. His nipples were dark, pointed.

Jungkook’s voice broke the silence, low and languid. “Have you ever sucked a cock before?”

Jimin froze. Something in his gut pulled, and he dropped his gaze instinctively, catching sight of Jungkook’s arousal beneath the water. He was swollen and flushed and tall. Jimin looked away quickly, his ears burning.

“No.”

Jungkook tilted his head back, studying Jimin through hooded eyes. “Ever laid with another alpha?”

“No,” he muttered, scrubbing intently at a spot of skin.

“Then I’m your first.”

“Yes.”

He scrubbed and washed and scrubbed and washed. And then Jimin blurted, “Have you laid with another omega before?”

He startled himself with his own audacity. Jungkook's hand stopped mid-reach for the wine bottle resting on the ledge. He turned his head slowly, fixing Jimin with a piercing stare that made him wish desperately he never asked.

"Of course," Jungkook said eventually. "Many."

Jimin's fingers tightened around the washcloth, his embarrassment flaring into something sharper, something he couldn't quite name. He scrubbed at Jungkook's shoulder with renewed vigour.

Jungkook laughed. "Are you jealous?"

Jimin scowled, shaking his head. "No."

"You are," Jungkook teased, leaning back lazily. "I can feel it."

"I'm not."

"Liar," Jungkook whispered, flicking water into Jimin's face with a playful smirk.

Jimin huffed, turning his attention to Jungkook's back. The ridges of old scars greeted him, faintly raised against otherwise smooth skin. His hand slowed as he traced them with the washcloth, his thoughts spiralling into dark corners. How many more scars had Jungkook carved into others? How many lives had been shredded under his hands?

The heat grew oppressive, their mingling scents, sweat and steam, coiling around Jimin's senses like a vice. His breaths came shorter, faster. His grip on the cloth loosened, and he let it fall away, his hand slipping to the hidden dagger at his waist.

It didn't seem quite as menacing under the soft glow of the lanternlight. His fingers curled around the hilt, his pulse roaring in his ears as he lifted it.

"What are you thinking, Jimin?"

His heart leapt out of his chest.

In an instant, Jungkook turned, faster than Jimin could react. His hand shot out, knocking the dagger cleanly from Jimin's grasp. It clattered onto the wet tiles, spinning out of reach as Jimin's eyes widened in alarm.

"No! No, no—"

Jungkook's arm looped around his waist, dragging him backwards. Jimin stumbled into him, and before he could find his footing, they crashed into the water with a loud splash.

Jimin gasped, water surging over his face as he kicked and struggled, pushing hard against Jungkook's chest. His movements were frantic, slippery palms finding no purchase on Jungkook's slick skin.

He managed to wrench free for a moment, splashing back towards the edge. With a heave, he tried to pull himself out, but Jungkook was there in a span of a breath. The alpha's arms wrapped around him from behind, his hands snaking up to Jimin's chest, gripping the neckline of his robes. With one hard tug, the fabric split at his chest.

"Let go!" Jimin shouted.

Jungkook ignored him, his other hand gripping the hem of Jimin's skirt. Another vicious tear and the fabric ripped from the bottom up, leaving him exposed.

And then Jungkook hauled him out and herded him. Jimin felt his back hit the cold surface of the column behind him. The chill of it against his overheated skin made him shudder. Jungkook's mouth crashed into his, the intensity of it stealing what little breath he had left in his lungs.

"Stop!" Jimin's voice cracked as he twisted his face away. He drove his foot into the alpha's, kicking his leg with all the force he could muster. Jungkook grunted at the impact, his hold loosening enough for Jimin to shove him away. He scrambled for the dagger, his hands shaking as they reached out in haste.

He didn't get far. Jungkook caught the hem of his robes, yanking him backwards with a force that sent him sprawling onto the wet tiles. Before Jimin could move, Jungkook was on him again, pinning him with his weight and turning him onto his back.

The heat of Jungkook's breath ghosted over Jimin's neck before his lips followed, pressing against his mating bite. The kiss was searing. Jolts of fire raced through Jimin's veins, his skin burning where Jungkook's lips lingered.

His hands shot up to Jungkook's face, fingers splayed wide. He pushed against the alpha's jaw, dug into his cheeks. His nails grazed skin, his breaths coming in sharp, erratic bursts. His chest rose and fell. He shoved harder, harder still, until with a final thrust, he managed to roll them over.

Jimin hovered above him, straddling the alpha, his mind spinning in a chaotic swirl of anticipation and instinct. As he shifted, he felt the alpha's hard cock brush over his hole. He was hot, delirious. Slick wet his thighs, staining the alpha's skin. Jungkook was so handsome, his body solid and warm. Jimin shifted again and the friction ripped a soft, breathless moan from his throat before he could stop it.

His body stiffened, his cheeks flushing with humiliation even as the heat in his core swelled. For a fleeting moment, he considered pulling away, but Jungkook's hands gripped his waist, fingers digging in. It was bruising, possessive. The alpha's blood red eyes locked onto his. It was too much, too close.

The shift happened so quickly Jimin barely registered it. Jungkook turned them over again, pinning Jimin beneath him. The weight of his body pressed down, warm and solid. Their legs knocked into each other. Jungkook's cock slid up the curve of his groin, prodding close. He was a breath away from Jimin's lips. Brushing, dragging. When he finally moved to kiss him,

Jimin angled his chin and caught his tongue. He pressed it flat against Jungkook's, the slick heat of their mouths locking together.

He breathed through his nose, in and out. And in. And out.

His chest rippled up and down in rhythm as he gathered his courage. Then he swung with his might and flipped them over. Jungkook let him, his hands falling away as Jimin straddled him. His thighs quivered, his body hummed. He reached for Jungkook's wrists, and raised them over his head. His hands were so small, barely covering the breadth of the alpha's. He knew Jungkook could easily break through his hold, but he didn't.

He just lay there, his dark eyes fixed on Jimin, watching with an expression that made Jimin's skin prickle. It wasn't just a look, it was a force, something heavy and consuming, crawling under Jimin's skin and leaving a trail of heat in its wake. The air between them was thick, the tension palpable as sweat beaded along Jimin's temple, rolling down his flushed face.

Slowly, Jimin lifted his hips. He swirled them slowly, feeling the blunt pressure of Jungkook's cockhead brushing against his rim. His eyes squeezed, his lips parted. His tongue spilled saliva. Little by little, he lowered himself to sit on Jungkook's cock. It was tight, wet. He pressed deeper than Jimin thought possible, until it felt like the heat coiled low in his belly was about to consume him.

He could feel his jasmine reaching out to his mate, spiralling and weaving. Around the columns, clinging to the heavy air, to the steam rising from the water, to the heat rising from their bodies. It curled around his ribs and tangled in his breath. It lingered on the walls and refused to leave. It tugged and yearned for the grounding depth of cedar.

He moved, his hips rolling in the rhythm he'd learned. Around and forward, back and forth. His robes barely clung to him, exposing a window of pale skin from his chest to his navel. His nipples were hardened peaks. His body swayed with grace. His blood wound in liquid fire. He dragged his hands down the length of the alpha's arms, feeling his taut muscles beneath his fingertips. He lifted his hips and lowered them, faster and faster to bounce on the alpha's cock. Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. His moans echoed against stone and shadow.

Jungkook's breathing grew heavier, uneven. A storm gathering force, feeding on its own frenzy. And then he surged upwards. One hand claimed both of Jimin's wrists, pinning them firmly behind his back, the other curled around the slender line of his waist.

Jimin gasped, the sound caught halfway between a breath and a cry, his balance tipping forward. The room tilted too, the walls swaying like they weren't quite sure if they were meant to hold. His wrists strained against Jungkook's grip. He felt Jungkook's mouth before he saw it. Their breaths fanned, hot and sticky, dripping between them.

Jungkook's lips found the corner of Jimin's mouth, the edge of his jaw. He was everywhere at once, his tongue tracing the hollow of Jimin's throat, his teeth grazing over trembling skin. A low, broken noise slipped from Jimin's lips. Jungkook caught it, swallowed it whole.

Jimin’s thighs burned as Jungkook shifted again, lifting him, adjusting him. His knees clenched tighter around Jungkook’s sides, his body arching into him. His thoughts unravelled and the threads snapped one by one. He didn’t notice when his head fell back, exposing his neck, when his breath turned ragged, when the line between resistance and surrender blurred into nothing.

And then he came.

And Jungkook came in him.

24.

Every morning, his routine was a quiet procession of rituals. Combs scraped softly over his scalp and brushes swept over his skin. His hair was braided, his brows were dusted, his lips were painted. Each stroke, each touch of silk and scented oil carried practiced precision. Perfection was the goal, not for himself but for the eyes that would appraise him later, searching for flaws he could not afford to have.

Around him, the gentle murmur of the servants' voices filled the chamber. Their chatter flowed freely, shifting between one another and Jimin, often speaking of the world beyond the walls that he had never known.

"Have you heard, Your Highness, about the harvest festival this year?" Lila asked, her hands nimbly pinning his braids.

"What about it?"

Mei clapped her hands. "Oh, my prince, they say the king himself will attend! He's ordered the feast to be held in the market square. The people are beside themselves with joy."

Jimin's fingers froze on the shimmering fabric of his robes. The thought of a king stepping into the dusty streets like a common man seemed foreign to him. Not since his childhood had he heard of such a thing. In the past, the townsfolk celebrated among themselves, while the noble families joined the royal court in the great hall for a feast of fresh produce. The idea of the king mingling with them now felt unsettlingly out of place.

"The king will be joining?"

"Yes, Your Highness. The king himself issued orders for the feast and seating arrangements. Even... even for you, they say." Lila cast a quick glance at Mei, who was nodding as well.

Jimin dropped his hands to his lap and turned at his waist, eyebrows high. "For me?"

"Yes, Your Highness." Lila answered. "Word has come from the court, Your Highness. You are to join the festivities as part of the royal retinue. The king himself requested it. Do you not wish to attend?"

"If the king has already issued the orders, I don't believe I can deny them."

"That is true," Mei replied easily. "The king is kind. Perhaps if you speak with him, he will not take offence to your leave."

His heart raced, thumping erratically against his chest. He had only ever ventured as far as the outskirts of the castle, where Seokjin had once taken him to in secret. It was where he met the rebel.

But never, not once, had he set foot in the market square. He had never walked its bustling streets, never heard the clamour of merchants hawking their wares or the hum of the city

alive beneath his feet. He had never seen performers spinning tales for wide-eyed children or witnessed the sun-warmed lives of the people who laughed and cried at will.

“Can I ask you something?”

Mei immediately sank to her knees, her eyes level with his. “Always, my prince.”

“What do the people say of the king? I ask for honesty, whether it is praise or condemnation.”

“The king, my prince, is…” She searched for words. “He’s kind, that is the truth. He has done much to ease the burdens of the common folk, especially the poor. The women in the lower districts speak of him often, how he ensures they have bread, that their crumbling wells are patched. How he sees to their small comforts. It’s rare, my prince, for a ruler to think of the little things. And yet, he has.”

Jimin nodded. He had heard whispers of Jungkook’s deeds, of his quiet interventions, but always through the veiled perspectives of court gossip. And he knew, painfully well, that his father had never spared a thought for the dinner on the poor man’s plate, so long as the treasury remained full and the noble houses placated. Mercy, his father had said more than once, was the luxury of weak rulers.

Lia stashed his comb away and retrieved a box of accessories. “But there are those who are… displeased. Some houses, those who don’t often speak to one another, have begun gathering in places they shouldn’t. My cousin serves as a stable hand for one of the noble families, and says she’s seen their carriages arriving at strange hours.”

Mei leaned closer, her voice barely a whisper now. “They’re angry, my prince. Some of the houses believe the king’s compassion is a weakness. There’s talk of resistance, not openly, but it’s there, festering in secret.”

Jimin’s mind began to drift as Mei’s chatter blurred into an indistinct hum.

Weakness.

The word lingered at the back of his throat with a bitter aftertaste. How could compassion be seen as weakness? Was it truly weakness to think of those who could offer nothing in return? Or was his father’s vision of strength simply a mask for cruelty?

“Your Highness?”

The sound of Lila’s voice pulled him back to the present. They had ornamented his hair and tied his robe sash. The fresh scent of jasmine surrounded him, as bright and fleeting as spring itself.

Jimin rose slowly, his robes flowing around him like liquid light. He stepped toward the full-length mirror, his reflection staring back at him—pristine, immaculate, and entirely detached from the turmoil inside.

“Will there be anything else, Your Highness?”

“No,” Jimin replied. “You’ve done well. You’re dismissed.”

The maids curtsied and slipped from the room. He moved to the window, his eyes tracing the city below. The streets hummed softly with the stirrings of dawn. His gaze shifted toward the north tower, resting on the queen’s quarters.

25.

Jimin's steps faltered as he approached the ornately carved doors. The faint scent of myrrh and aged wood reached him before the sound of voices. He stopped, his hand resting on the edge of the gilded handle.

"…it will be swift. Clean. The festival offers the perfect opportunity."

"And the risks?" came his mother's voice. "I will not act without certainty."

"The risks are always great, Your Grace," Lord Sangyeon replied. Jimin recognised him now, his mother's brother. His uncle. "But it's a risk well calculated. The festival will unfold as intended, and the court will have no cause to question it. When the moment comes, it will appear as nothing more than a tragic accident. The king surrounded by his people, only for fate to claim him."

"Ensure there are no mistakes. This cannot become a spectacle. The bastard's death must feel inevitable—unavoidable, even."

Jimin's breath died in his throat. All his thoughts ground to a halt and he felt as though his heart had plummeted to his feet. Surely, *surely,* they weren't conspiring against Jungkook.

"I shall see that the instructions are delivered."

"And what of the aftermath?" his mother asked. "The people will mourn, yes, but they must also understand. Grief must be tempered with resolve. The kingdom must not fall into chaos."

"With all respect, my queen, the aftermath is secondary. First, the deed must be done. The rest will fall into place with time."

Though he would rather be anywhere else, Jimin flattened himself against the cold stone wall and strained to catch every word. His hand clung to the surface, slick with the sweat that beaded on his palms.

"And you're certain he will be in the square?"

"The bastard fancies himself beloved, a king of the people," Sangyeon said, his sneer audible even through the door. "He will walk the square, unguarded but for the guise of humility. A single blade, my lady, and the realm is restored."

There was a pause, so long that Jimin almost dared to believe the conversation had ended. Then his mother spoke.

"If it fails, Sangyeon, the blood will not be on your hands alone. My position would be forfeit. And my son—" Her voice faltered, just for a moment. "My son must never know. The fool has thrown himself like some gutter slut, wagging his tail for the first alpha to fuck him.

He’s blind. Utterly and pathetically blind. No sense, no pride, no loyalty to his own blood. But that will change. Once this is done, he’ll learn his place. I’ll see to it.”

Jimin’s chest tightened, the words sinking into him like poisoned arrows. A wave of humiliation washed over him, sickening and sudden.

“Then I leave the prince to you. But in this plan, I can promise there is no failure. The assassin is one of ours, loyal and well trained. The bastard king will fall, and the council will see you for what you truly are, the saviour this kingdom needs.”

Jimin stepped back from the door, his movements clumsy, his pulse a storm. The conversation behind him continued, but he could no longer hear it over the roar in his ears.

He made it as far down as the corridor, then slipped into a shadowed alcove. He felt sick, desperate. His hands trembled.

26.

The moon hung like a pale sliver of bone in the vast, star-scattered sky, its cold light spilling over the godswood. Jimin moved soundlessly through the ancient trees. Sleep had abandoned him, and with it, any semblance of peace.

He had weighed the thought of confronting his mother, of demanding the truth that she was hiding from him. But how could he stand before her, knowing what might follow? Once her schemes were brought to light, he would be forced to choose. Either to side with her and risk staining his hands with her deeds, or to stand against her and sever the blood bond that bound their family.

His resolve faltered there, unspooling like thread from a fraying hem.

I can't let him die.

He closed his eyes, fighting back the rush of panic that threatened to drown him. He couldn't join her—he wouldn't. But the thought of betraying her, of sacrificing his mother to save his mate, was equally unthinkable. Blood demanded loyalty, love demanded sacrifice.

His frustration broke open in quiet tears, spilling down his cheeks.

He stopped by the great redwood tree. The branches stretched wide to the arms of some forgotten god, the crimson leaves soughed like the voices of the past. His hand hovered over the smooth bark, where once, Jungkook had kissed him.

Feet padded, leather scuffed against stone.

Jimin hurriedly wiped his eyes, already knowing who it was before he even saw him.

"Why do you still follow me? Who exactly are you protecting me from?"

He didn't answer immediately, instead circling in a wide arc and coming to a stop just ahead of Jimin.

"Because," Taehyung replied, "—if the king's life is in danger, then so is yours."

"Do you truly think my own people would harm me?"

Taehyung's lips twisted into a cynical curve. Against the gnarly trees and the flitting shadows, he looked like he was born of the forest itself. A nightmare. "It must be a comfort, being you. To trust so easily. To think loyalty is stronger than ambition. To be so full of faith in those who would sooner slit throats than offer a hand."

Jimin's breath quickened, his pulse in his ears. "I don't know what you mean."

"Do you like stories?"

Jimin frowned. “I wish to be alone.”

“I have a story for you.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

Taehyung lunged forward, his hand seizing the front of Jimin’s robes and pulling him close. “You will listen regardless.” Then he let go and drew back to lean against the tree.

Jimin stumbled, wide-eyed in shock.

“This is a story known to history, but hidden partly by the hands of greed. A tale of a king, long before you were born.”

Jimin could almost feel like the forest was closing in on him, as though the trees and birds and the night skies had turned on their ears. The wind stirred, the earth hardened. He was alone in this forest, and Taehyung continued.

“You’ve likely heard he had a son, a prince who loved a woman from a powerful house. But he was already mated, and the gods forbade such unions. Still, he couldn’t resist her. He kidnapped her, took her away to a secret place, and for a time, their love was known only to them.”

Jimin felt a chill as Taehyung’s words settled over him.

“The woman bore a child, but no one in the kingdom knew of the child’s birth, nor of its existence. The man’s transgression couldn’t be forgiven, and so their houses turned against each other, then others joined in, and the blood of the land turned thick with war. In the end, it was your ancestors who rose from the ruin of that carnage to claim the crown. In the aftermath, the people forgot. They forgot the old story, the tale of the king, the woman, and the prince.”

Jimin’s voice barely broke the stillness. “What happened to the child?”

Taehyung’s eyes darkened, his gaze growing distant as if he could see the past unfurling. “The child’s parents died in the war and the boy was left to freeze in the snow. But there was a man, a chief in the northern lands who found him. He was their friend, the prince’s friend, and he knew who this child was. He took the boy in, raised him as his own and told no one of his heritage. But the woman couldn’t look past her husband’s love for a child that wasn’t hers, and so she treated him with distance, without love and affection.”

“And then?”

“When the boy was no longer a child, the man sent him away to the northern wall to protect him. The whispers of his true bloodline had travelled south and reached the ears of the court. The new king... your father, had learned of the heir.”

Jimin was barely able to breathe. His heart hammered painfully against his ribs. “My father knew?”

“Yes, he knew. By then, House Moonstone had ruled for three generations and the power of the throne had settled upon them like a second skin. Far from court, the boy grew up diligently at the wall, a little apart from others, but fair and kind. He made friends, true ones. And then, one day, a raven came.” Taehyung paused. “His family was slaughtered. His father, his mother, his siblings—all of them. Two brothers, a sister, a babe still in its crib.”

“And then he waged a war against the royal family,” Jimin murmured, almost to himself. He wanted to turn, to walk away, but his feet felt rooted to the earth, as if the very soil was pulling him under. “And killed the family who killed his.”

“And now you know,” Taehyung said, his voice like the final toll of a bell. “What your father did, what your family did. You may inherit the crown, but its roots are sunk in blood. And blood will never forget.”

The starkness of those words reverberated in his mind, sinking into him with heaviness. His bond throbbed. Jimin looked around him, breathing in deep. But the air caught in his chest and he choked a laugh. His eyes welled with tears. And when he tilted his head back up towards the sky, it laughed at him too.

27.

Jimin's lips were on Jungkook's before the thought had fully formed in his mind. It wasn't courage that drove the reckless leap of his heart, but need. A fierce, gnawing hunger that clawed at his soul. All the fears of an uncertain tomorrow and the yearning he was too beaten to voice erupted in the tremor of that kiss.

Jungkook froze for a heartbeat, his eyes wide with surprise. And then something in him broke loose. He surged forward, capturing Jimin's face with his firm, calloused hands, his lips parting to meet Jimin's with the same consuming hunger. Their heads moved, their lips pressed, their tongues tangled. Jimin shuddered as Jungkook's teeth grazed his lower lip, as he licked it so slowly it set Jimin's nerves alight.

His mind reeled with the realisation he had never been the one to act first. Every time before, Jungkook had led. And Jimin was simply pulled in by his unrelenting determination. But now it was his kiss, his choice, and he could feel the shift in Jungkook's response. The alpha's grip tightened like chains of iron, arms banding around Jimin as though he might vanish if held too loosely.

Jungkook's breath was hot against his lips, his dark locks tangling in Jimin's trembling hands. The air around them seemed impossibly still, the only sounds their ragged breathing, the faint rustle of fabric as they drew closer. Jimin pulled back just enough to draw a shuddering breath.

Then he pressed forward until Jungkook's knees met the edge of the bed. They tumbled back in a heap. Jimin's breath came in shallow, heated gasps as his hands fumbled at Jungkook's tunic, desperate to peel it away. With a growl of impatience, Jungkook sat up and tugged the garment off himself. His hair fell into disarray, his broad chest rose and fell.

Jimin's fingers worked quickly at the laces of Jungkook's trousers, pulling until they loosened and fell open. His cock sprang free, rigid in length. Jimin paused, his hands still, his gaze lingering. Slowly, he stood and stripped off his robes. Dozens of lit candelabra flickered over his bare skin. Jungkook pushed his trousers down and kicked them aside.

Without breaking his gaze, Jimin climbed onto the bed and into Jungkook's lap. He kissed him with a ferocity that burned, trailing his lips down the strong column of his neck. The bond tugged and he bit down. It wasn't as deep as the bite the alpha left on him, but it was enough to make him groan. He bucked his hips into Jimin, his cock dragging on the underside of Jimin's belly, kissing him with teeth and tongue and saliva.

Jimin kissed him back, head tilting, body moving as he pushed Jungkook against the headboard and slid lower. His knees parted Jungkook's legs and he settled between them. His cheeks were red when he looked up at the alpha, the boldness in his eyes not quite as stark. His hands pressed against the alpha's strong thighs.

"How do I... suck you?"

The tip of his ears burned. Jungkook had gone quiet, his dark eyes locked on Jimin. He slid his hand into Jimin's hair. "I'll show you. Come closer."

Jimin hesitated, his gaze drifting down to the length of Jungkook's cock. It was thick and veined, and lay against his stomach, the head flushed and already slick with seed. He swallowed hard, leaning forward to press his lips to the base. Jungkook's thighs twitched, and his grip tightened, guiding him.

"Use your tongue," Jungkook murmured, his voice tight. "Taste it."

Jimin flicked his tongue out tentatively, dragging it along the shaft. Cedar flooded Jimin's mouth. It was a rich, pungent warmth that spiralled down his senses in a heady rush. He licked again, less hesitant. Jungkook groaned low in his chest. Jimin mouthed at the heated skin, his movements eager and unpractised.

"Open wider," Jungkook rasped. "Take it deeper. Swallow and suck, that's it."

Jimin parted his lips, taking the tip into his mouth. His jaw stretched as he sucked lightly, his tongue swirling clumsily around the head. Jungkook hissed, his hand gripping the sheets, his other hand pushing Jimin further down.

Jimin choked and pulled back with a cough. The alpha caught his chin, his thumb brushing over Jimin's lips and wiping away his seed. He brought it to his own mouth and licked it clean. Heat wrapped around Jimin's insides and leaked down his hole. It felt like a thousand stirring wings in the dark of his belly, frantic and wild.

"Loosen your jaw. Breathe through your nose." Jungkook spat into his palm, slicking his cock before guiding Jimin down again.

Jimin let his lips stretch, his tongue sliding along the underside as he took more of the alpha in. Every strained groan from him twisted his cedar into something darker, something smoky and sharp. His hips pressed forward, slow and deep, guiding Jimin into a rhythm. Jimin's hands tightened around Jungkook's thighs as he leaned in, the head of his cock brushing the back of his throat. He hollowed his cheeks and sucked harder, his eyes watering but determined. Jungkook's thighs trembled under his grip, and the tension in the room thickened until it felt like the very air might shatter.

When Jimin pulled back to breathe, thin threads of saliva connected his lips to Jungkook's cock head. They gleamed in the low light.

"Come here. I want to fuck you."

Jungkook sat up and hauled Jimin onto his lap. Jimin flew into the alpha, panting, drool sliding down his chin. His cheeks were wet, his face was warm. Jungkook's hands guided Jimin's hips, steadying him as the head of his cock pressed against Jimin's hole. Their eyes collided, and for a moment, they were all that existed. Jimin's heart pounded, his tongue weighed down by secrets. He braced his hands on Jungkook's shoulders. And slowly, achingly slow, Jungkook pressed inside, his jaw tightening as Jimin's body adjusted, yielding to him.

Jimin's forehead pressed against Jungkook's, his breaths coming in soft gasps that spilled against Jungkook's lips. "Breathe," Jungkook murmured, warm as sun-soaked honey. He ran his hands down Jimin's sides, then wrapped them tightly around his waist.

Jimin exhaled shakily, his mouth brushing Jungkook's. "Be safe," he whispered. "Be safe, please."

In the heavy, stifling air of the room, Jungkook's features contorted. His hips rose, rolling into Jimin. He moved slow and deliberate, as though each motion was a thought wrapped in flesh. "I will."

"No, promise me," Jimin insisted, his voice cracking. He looked down, his lips pushed into a pout, the sting of tears beginning in his eyes. "Promise me you'll always come back. Please."

Jungkook stilled, his brows furrowing deeply as his thumb brushed away the tear tracks streaking Jimin's flushed cheeks. "I promise," he said, heavy with sincerity. He leaned in, kissing the lingering traces of Jimin's tears away.

The searing burn of frantic, twisted fear slithered like lead through Jimin's veins. He shuddered, his arms winding around Jungkook's neck as he pulled him closer. "Good," he said, his lips grazing the shell of Jungkook's ear. "Good."

And when Jungkook began to move again, filling him so fully, so completely, he dissolved into a broken moan. He clutched at Jungkook's back, his nails raking down Jungkook's hardened skin. They rocked together, the air thick with heat and quiet and broken gasps. He buried his face in Jungkook's neck, his teeth grazing the skin there as his body tightened and trembled on the edge of release.

Jungkook groaned, his own breaths uneven, his hands gripping Jimin's hips to lift him higher, urging him faster. "Let go," he said against Jimin's ear. "I have you."

Jimin clung to him, his body tensing as he tipped over the cliff. It was wet and sticky between them, with semen and slick and sweat. He gasped into Jungkook's mouth, his moans soft and breathless, his body going pliant in Jungkook's hold.

And then the world tilted. Jungkook flipped them over, laying Jimin flat on the bed beneath him. His surprise wound up in a startled cry as Jungkook pressed him down, pinning him to the mattress.

Each sharp snap of his hips rattled the bedframe against the walls. The sheets swallowed Jimin whole, pulling him deeper into a daze. A familiar tension wound through his belly. His legs locked around Jungkook's waist as though they might anchor him to some semblance of steadiness. His nails carved lines down Jungkook's back.

The room felt too small, thick with the echo of skin meeting skin. Jimin's cries spilled and scattered and tangled with Jungkook's low moans. He took and took, his body arching to meet every brutal thrust. He was so overwhelmed, swept under the weight of something vast and unrelenting. His fingers curled, his head thrown back, eyes shut tight against the riot of stars bursting behind his lids.

When Jungkook came, it was with a deep, guttural growl. His body shuddered violently as he spilled inside Jimin. His cum was a rush of steady, pulsing waves. He pressed Jimin into the mattress, his weight grounding him as he rode out his release, hips grinding in slow, trembling jerks. And then he pulled out and pushed Jimin's legs up, folding him until his knees pressed near his shoulders.

Jimin's hand shot out, but Jungkook knocked it away. He reached again, and Jungkook laid his hands flat against the bed. His eyes were rimmed with red. Their gazes met and he blinked and Jimin breathed through his nose, his mouth. Jungkook drew back and crouched low. And soon after, Jimin felt Jungkook's tongue sweeping over his slick hole. He clenched and his lips parted. He moaned high and airy and light, a sound sweeter than birds.

Jungkook groaned, his hands gripping Jimin's thighs to hold him open as he licked and sucked. His tongue lapped and circled and pressed between Jimin's walls, teasing out trembles and gasps. The tension in his belly coiled tighter, drawing blood from his limbs and head to his middle. His slick flowed endlessly, smearing down his cheeks and thighs.

"Please—"

"Just one more," Jungkook murmured against him. He spit onto Jimin's already wet entrance, his tongue following to lap it up. His nose dug and his chin scraped.

Jimin's cries rose in pitch, his body shaking and jerking as pleasure spiralled through him. His cock twitched against his stomach, already hard again and aching for release. He felt Jungkook's tongue fuck into him like his cock would, and the thought of it was so crass and humiliating that when Jungkook sealed his lips over Jimin's hole to suck him again, Jimin came with a keening, broken cry. His body locked up and his release splattered between them, his entire frame trembling as Jungkook worked him through every last spasm.

When it was over, Jungkook hovered over him. Jimin drank in the sight of his golden skin and the hard lines of his body. Jungkook's lips glistened, his hair was matted, his feral eyes bore a possessive edge that refused to wane. Then he leaned down to press a kiss to Jimin's cheek.

28.

The town square felt like a different world, a dream painted in brilliant hues and crowded with people who moved like currents in a living sea. Jimin had never been anywhere so loud or so alive. The bright banners overhead rippled with the wind, golden thread catching the light of the afternoon sun. Roasting meat mingled with the smell of spiced cider and fresh hay, so heady it almost overwhelmed him.

Children wove through the crush of bodies, shrieking laughter that rang like birdcalls. Their wild joy pulsed defiantly against the thick hum of the market. Jimin tried to keep as close to Jungkook as possible, his retinue trailing dutifully behind him.

Nearby, a woman sold wooden toys. They were sleek, polished figurines shaped like animals. He thought fleetingly of the rough-hewn carvings his brothers had hoarded as boys. They were simpler, coarser, and Jimin had often stolen from their stash to play with on his own. He felt a sudden longing for his brothers, their laughter, their quarrels, though he was never really part of their world.

“Hot pies! Golden and fresh! Spiced apples and honey—still steaming!”

The shouting vendor carved into one of his many pies with a sharp knife. Jimin’s stomach growled. He wanted to try a piece, but he didn’t have any coin on him and he was too shy to ask from Jungkook. He swallowed his hunger and plodded along.

Musicians had gathered around a chipped, moss-covered fountain, their flutes and fiddles and lyres trilling a melody. A drum beat low and steady, coaxing even the most reluctant into rhythmic sways.

A moment later, Jungkook was at his side. He offered Jimin a paper-wrapped parcel.

“What is it?”

“Take it,” Jungkook said simply. “It’s for you.”

Jimin accepted it with a blush dusting his cheeks. He unwrapped the bundle carefully, the scent hitting him before he even saw the contents. Inside was a steaming pie, its golden crust still hot to the touch.

“Oh,” Jimin murmured. “Thank you, Alpha.”

“Eat it while it’s hot.”

Jimin bit into the pie. It was everything and more he’d imagined it would be. The flavours were rich and the buttery crust melted on his tongue. Sluicing in the back of his throat, he could taste the sticky sweetness of honey.

As he ate, Jungkook watched.

“It’s so loud here,” Jimin said after a while. “Does it always feel this much?”

Jungkook angled his head down towards him, leaning in close enough that Jimin felt the heat of his breath against his ear. His hand rested at the curve of Jimin’s waist, his cedar syrupy thick in the heat. “It’s meant to. The people thank the gods for the rain that nourished their crops, for the harvest that fills their bellies. For another year where death hasn’t come to claim them. They celebrate survival, fortune—and for that, they’ll make as much noise as they damn well please.”

Jimin let his gaze flit from stall to stall, absorbing the vibrant chaos. Bolts of cloth dyed in hues rippled on rooftops. Spices were piled in conical mounds that reminded him of mountains he could see through his windows.

But it wasn’t just the sights or sounds that startled him—it was the townsfolk. They flocked to Jungkook, their faces luminous with something between awe and gratitude. Baskets of apples, freshly baked loaves, jars of golden honey were all pressed into his hands.

“My lord, the rains came because of you. The fields blossomed because of you.”

And Jungkook would say, “The rains come for those who labour. Your fields flourish because you’ve earned them.”

And so it went until the sun dipped low, and the square was bathed in molten gold. They arrived at the centre, where a wooden platform had been raised. Crimson-clad dancers climbed onto its surface, their swords glinting like fire against the waning light. The whispers of the crowd swelled into a tide of anticipation.

Jungkook leaned close once more, his breath brushing Jimin’s cheek. “A sword dance,” he said softly. “It’s both performance and prayer, a tribute to the harvest and the gods of war. Watch.”

And Jimin did.

The dancers embodied grace and elegance that flared their robes with every movement. Their eyes were painted black, their hands smeared with red. The blades they wielded spun in arcs of light. The sharp hiss of steel cutting through the air made Jimin swallow a gasp. The crowd erupted into howls and cheers.

The bodies of the dancers contorted. Their feet struck the wooden platform with the rhythm of a thousand-strong army. The noise was loud, thundering. It drifted further into the back of his mind, stretching far. He could feel he was in the presence of something sacred and ancient. But beneath the beauty and precision, there was something that filled him with a sense of dread.

The music surged, the tone shifted.

The dancers spun faster, their bodies tightening in frantic whirls, and the beat of the drums grew louder, heavier, like the pulse of something alive, something inescapable. Their movements no longer felt like a prayer, but a desperate, frantic plea.

A cold shiver slithered down Jimin's spine, the kind that curled and tightened like a hand of ice. He turned to Jungkook, but before he could speak, Jungkook's hand shot out, pulling him close. His eyes were hard as stone, flashing sharp and calculating. And then one of the dancers broke from the line, her body twisting with unnatural speed. The gleam of her blade sliced through the air before it buried itself deep in the throat of one of the king's guard.

A scream tore through the square as the man crumpled to the ground, blood pooling around him.

"Ambush!" Jungkook roared, his own sword drawn in a single swift jerk.

The crowd surged forward in a frantic wave, people pushing and clawing to escape. Stalls were upended, their contents scattering across the blood-streaked ground. Coins and food and trinkets tumbled in every direction. Jimin was shoved sideways, and for a brief spell, the world tilted.

Jungkook caught him. "Taehyung!" He yelled.

"I have him! Go!"

Taehyung stepped in front of Jimin, his left hand forming a barrier, his right gripping his sword. He fended off attack after attack so quickly he was a blur. But even with Taehyung's protection, fear clamped down on Jimin's chest like a vice. It was clear they were after Jungkook, but the townsfolk were no safer. They were hacked down, simply for being in the way. His eyes darted across the chaos of clashing steel, screams of pain, the sickening splatter of blood painting the cobblestone. Those who weren't killed by blade were trapped in the fray, lost to the crush of the mob.

And in the midst of it all, Jungkook was a storm incarnate. Each swing cut through the assassins with brutal efficiency. Steel cleaved through flesh, the spray of blood misting the air. His face was a grim mask, eyes sharp with fury. He parried and sliced, and blocked and stabbed. But the assassins kept coming. One by one, the number of Jungkook's guards dwindled. They assassins circled him, no longer in ones or twos, but in groups of three and four, closing in like a tightening noose.

Jimin's heart seized when he saw a blade raised towards Jungkook's back. He moved on instinct, slipping beneath Taehyung's arm and running fast. He picked up a weapon from the ground, screaming his alpha's name. Time slowed. He reached just as Jungkook turned, and by then Jimin had drove the sword into the attacker's side.

The man fell, but before Jimin could react, another assassin lunged at him, sword raised high. His life flashed before his eyes. He felt the tickle of a breeze on his cheek, his palms clammy sweat. One heartbeat stretched taut and fragile. Then, as if the world bent for him, Jungkook was there—faster than thought. He stepped between Jimin and the blade, taking the strike to his shoulder. The force of it knocked Jungkook back into Jimin, who instinctively raised his arms to wrap around him. From behind, Jimin saw a second slash rake down Jungkook's side. His mouth moved in silence, words lost, as blood gushed in thick, hot rivers.

Jungkook's roar shattered the world like a fracture in the sky, a sound so raw, so guttural, it seemed to tear the earth apart beneath their feet. His body was torn and bruised, and yet he didn't falter. When he turned to face the next attacker, there was no man, no beast, nothing but the fury that lived in the pit of him. His sword arced through the air with a terrible grace, cleaving through bone, sinew, and soul itself. He left nothing but the echoes of his rage, the taste of iron thick in the air.

The square was a massacre. And Jungkook was an unstoppable whirlpool of violence that dragged everything into its maw. The remaining assassins fell like rain, their bodies crumpling, their weapons broken.

Jimin knelt in the centre, his palms flat against the ground. He couldn't look away. He couldn't turn his head nor close his eyes nor pretend he didn't see. Jungkook seemed to move with a power that bordered on the divine, but whose body was nothing but a ruin. The pain in his eyes was the same as the fire in his heart, burning, relentless, unyielding. And he killed and killed and he stumbled towards Jimin, broken but still fighting. His sword slipped from his grasp.

"Omega—"

"You're hurt," Jimin choked out, his voice shaking. "You're—"

And all at once, the world seemed to collapse on itself. Jimin's hands flew out, catching Jungkook before he could fall. Tears burned in his eyes. The metallic taste of death lodged a lump in his throat. He could feel the tremors of Jungkook's heartbeat beneath his palms, slow and fading, slipping through his fingers like sand. The world outside fell away, leaving only the rhythm of life and death and the man who'd fought so hard to protect them both, now crumbling in his arms.

29.

The healer worked in silence. She stitched, wiped, and packed the gaping wounds. Each time her needle pierced Jungkook's flesh, Jimin flinched as though it was his own.

He had never been afraid of silence before. The halls of his childhood had often been hushed. But this silence was violent. Each ragged breath that Jungkook dragged from his broken body felt like a drip of a candle wax melting down, impossible to stop.

"The poison has slowed," the healer said at last. "But his body's weak. It'll be a close thing."

"What does that mean?"

The healer glanced at him, her eyes sharp beneath the lines of fatigue. And pity. They had all looked at him with pity when Jungkook's body was carried through the streets and into the castle.

"It means he's alive. For now. But he may not live to see the sun set."

The grief that surged through him pillaged everything tender he had left to give. How much more could they endure? How much more before there was nothing left to fight for? The ache in his chest felt ancient, like it had always been there, a hollowed-out echo of a kindness the world had never bothered to show them.

He bowed his head. His prayer was rote now, its words stripped of faith and reduced to a bargain with a deaf and indifferent sky. He didn't notice the tears falling until they landed on the back of his clasped hands.

Outside, the faintest light of dawn began to creep through the cracks in the shutters, chasing the shadows into the corners.

The healer stood suddenly, wiping her hands on a rag. "If the fever breaks, the worst will be over."

Jimin nodded mutely, his entire world narrowed to the rise and fall of Jungkook's chest.

"But you should prepare yourself, Your Highness. He might not wake. The possibility of it is great."

The fever came, as the healer had warned, pulling Jungkook into fits of shivering and stillness. Jimin kept a damp cloth pressed to his forehead. He refilled the pitcher for fresh water when Jungkook woke up. He adjusted the furs again and again. Whenever Jungkook's fingers slackened in his, Jimin's grip tightened, as though sheer will alone could tether him here.

Exhaustion pressed into his bones but never enough to move him from the chair. Each time Jungkook's body stilled, Jimin's heart lurched, only to crash back into place when the faint rhythm of his chest resumed.

He spoke as Jungkook slept.

“The people are angry.”

“The ministers have turned on each other—some of them have spilled blood. Their own. Others.”

“I’m scared.”

“I’m sorry.”

The candle sputtered in its holder, the wax pooling and hardening in jagged lines. Murmurs of unrest trickled in through the heavy doors. It was distant at first, like an undercurrent, but then it grew sharper—a clash of voices, the sound of scuffling feet, and a sudden thud against the wood.

Jimin’s head snapped up, his body tensing instinctively. The door burst open, and his mother entered.

“Jimin—” Relief flashed across her face, but it was quickly replaced by a guarded tension. She stopped short, her gaze flicking to Jungkook, then back to her son, standing protectively between her and the bed.

“Please leave.”

“I heard you almost died. No one would tell me where you were. No one would let me see you. Do you know what it’s like, to think your child might be—”

“I don’t want to talk to you,” Jimin cut her off, his tone sharp enough to stop her in her tracks.

Her eyes widened, hurt flickering across her face before it hardened. “You don’t mean that. I’m your mother—”

“And I’m your *son*. Would you not listen to me for once?”

“I beg your pardon?” Her eyes narrowed. He could see the shield she wore against outsiders stiffen her back and sharpen her tone.

“This is not the time, please. He’s dying. Mother, my mate is dying—”

“And good riddance to the bastard when he’s gone!”

Jimin closed his eyes and screwed them shut.

“You were his queen. You stood by his side while he slaughtered Jungkook’s family. While he burned their house to the ground and hunted them like animals. And you let him. You let him kill a baby who wasn’t even a threat. I know what happened, Mother. I know *why*.”

Her expression twisted. “Oh, not this again.”

“Yes, this again.” Jimin raised his voice. “Why were we so cruel, Mother? How could you sleep at night knowing what you’d done to innocent children?”

“I didn’t have a choice!”

“You could have tried!” Jimin begged. “You could have fought for something other than your crown. But you chose silence. You chose power.”

“You’re too young to understand what it cost me to protect you. Your brothers. Your father, even.”

“Do you think this is protection? That this castle and its throne built on ashes and blood could ever be anything but a tomb?”

“This is how you speak to me, after I came to see if you’re safe. To see if there’s anything left of my son.”

Jimin blinked at her. “What do you want, Mother? Truly.”

She appeared as stiff and uneasy as he felt. He couldn’t recall a time he had defied her so openly. But now, a rush of fire coursed through him. He couldn’t stop himself even if he tried.

“I want you to explain to me how my son—my pride, my heir—could betray his blood for the likes of *him*.”

“I’ve done nothing but obey you my entire life, and now, because I won’t turn my back on him, you call me a traitor?”

He could see her trembling, the weary lines between her brows. “You’ve done more than refuse me, Jimin. You’ve humiliated me! You’ve shamed your family. Do you have any idea what people are saying? That my son has thrown himself at the enemy’s feet like a street—”

“Don’t finish that sentence. Not when you know exactly why I can’t.”

“Because you’re weak,” she spat, her anger bubbling over. “That’s why. You’ve let him control you, and all for what? His alpha cock? There are many more who would die to have you. You used to have pride, Jimin. You used to understand duty.”

“Say you regret it. Say you’re sorry for what you did to him—to me. For orchestrating the attack.”

Her lips thinned. Sweat beaded at her temples. “I can’t. I won’t. Because I’m not. What we did—what *I* did—was for your future.”

Jimin’s chest heaved, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “You’ve taken everything from me. You tore him apart, and now you want me to keep tearing at him, to keep choosing your hatred over the only thing that’s given me a reason to keep fighting.”

“He’s poisoned you.” Her face was blotched, as if she too was on the verge of breaking. “That mutt has blinded you. You think you love him, but it’s a lie. He’s using you, Jimin. And when he’s done, he’ll leave you in ruins.”

“You don’t know him. You don’t know what he’s sacrificed. He almost died protecting me, Mother.”

“You think that makes him worthy? He killed your father, your brothers. How can you even think of being loyal to him?!”

“Please,” he whispered, reaching for her hand. “Please, just let this end. I can’t do this anymore, Mother. I can’t keep fighting you. I love you—I’ve always loved you—but I won’t turn my back on him. I won’t leave him.”

His arms wrapped around her rigid frame. She didn’t move at first. Then, slowly, her hands slid up to rest on his back.

“Jimin,” she murmured, her voice softening. “I love you, too. Everything I’ve done, I’ve done for you. But you’re confused. This... this *thing* you have with him, it’s a mistake. You have to trust me. You’re my son, your father’s son. The last remaining heir.”

Something inside him broke, something fragile and essential, crumbling like ash in the wind. He stepped back, his tears falling silently as he looked at her, really looked at her, and saw nothing but the past.

“I can’t.” Above all, he felt brokenhearted. “I can’t be who you want me to be.”

Her face twisted in anger, but before she could speak, Jimin called for the guards.

“Escort my mother out. Make sure she stays in her quarters.”

She blanched before the fury returned. “You would dare throw me out? Have you lost your mind?! Jimin! I’m talking to you—I’m the queen, you can’t do this to me—”

“Please, take her.”

She struggled against the guards, her voice rising in protest. He couldn’t bear to watch as they dragged her out. When the doors swung shut, the room was plunged into heavy silence. He turned back to the bed, his knees threatening to give out as he sank into the chair. His heart was a tight knot, tangled with anger, regret, and sorrow—he could hardly tell which was which anymore.

“Jungkook,” he whispered, his voice cracking. “You have to wake up. I can’t do this alone.”

But Jungkook’s lips were as pale as riverstones. His hairline was matted with blood the colour of rust.

Time seemed to stretch, thick and slow.

Too tired to keep his eyes open, Jimin let his head fall against the back of the chair. Sleep tugged at him with a force he couldn't resist.

When he woke, the room was unnaturally still. He blinked, disoriented, and looked down. Jungkook's hand was resting on top of his, curling gently around his own. The squeeze was so subtle, so delicate, that for a moment Jimin wasn't sure it was real.

30.

Almost instantly, the mutiny was crushed. It seemed Jungkook's survival was the pivot upon which everything hinged. If he had died, the ministers would have rallied to continue the rebellion. But with him alive, their resolve crumbled like the flimsiest sandcastle.

They were dragged into the great hall, where the throne stood ominously vacant. Jungkook remained confined to the infirmary. But it didn't stop his absence from casting an even heavier weight over the proceedings.

One by one, the messenger called out the punishments.

"Death."

"Death."

"Death."

The edict echoed like a tolling bell. Among the names read aloud were Jimin's uncle and Jimin's mother. He'd known this moment would come, had braced himself for it, but the inevitability didn't soften the blow.

In the days that followed, his stomach churned violently, his body trembling as he leaned over the basin, retching until there was nothing left. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, the bitterness in his throat only a fraction of the despair that consumed him. The tray of food was left untouched on the table. Nothing the cook prepared could stir his appetite.

"Please, Your Highness," Mei urged softly, lingering near him. "You haven't eaten properly in days. And your condition, it's not normal to be so unwell for so long. Let me call for aid."

"No. It'll draw attention. There are too many eyes on us already."

Through the fog of his thoughts, he noticed she stepped back with a resigned nod. He appreciated her concern but the thought of never seeing his mother again haunted him. He pressed a hand over his heart, as though that could quell the ache. The way history would remember her, her name would be cursed.

Much later, he was startled when the maid returned, this time with someone unfamiliar trailing behind her.

Jimin sat up, alarmed. "What's this?"

"He's a healer, my prince," Mei answered, hurrying over to settle by Jimin. "From the outskirts. No one will know he was here. Please, just let him check on you."

Jimin hesitated, his resistance faltering. He looked at the healer who stood silently, waiting for permission. After a long moment, Jimin exhaled shakily and nodded. "Fine. Just… be quick."

The examination was thorough. Jimin lay still, his mind clouded with worry. Finally, the healer stepped back, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

“Congratulations, Your Highness.”

Jimin blinked at him, confused. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re carrying the heir.”

Jimin sat frozen, his thoughts racing. Pregnant? Him? Now? It didn’t seem real. His gaze dropped to his hands, trembling slightly in his lap. Mei was already beside him, her expression shifting rapidly between astonishment and concern.

“You must take care, Your Highness,” she murmured, her voice hushed but urgent. “This changes everything. Please, you must eat. Rest. Let us manage everything else.”

Jimin opened his mouth to respond but found no words. *This changes everything*. The phrase echoed in his mind. How could he reconcile this fragile new life growing inside him with the chaos that surrounded him? His mother would be dead. His uncle would be dead. The blood of his family would once more be fresh on Jungkook’s hands, however justified it might have been. And yet.

He swallowed hard, a lump forming in his throat. “No one must know. Not yet.”

Mei nodded, her hand hovering briefly over his as though to comfort him but falling short. “As you wish, Your Highness. But please, let us care for you. You cannot do this alone.”

He wanted to believe her. To let go, just for a moment, and trust someone else to shoulder the burden. But the ache in his chest wouldn’t allow it. He dismissed the healer with a stiff nod and waited for the room to empty before collapsing back onto the bed, his hands clutching the thin fabric of his robes.

It was only when the tears came that he felt the first stirrings of what might be hope. Despite everything—despite the grief and guilt and unbearable weight pressing down on him, there was a life inside him now. Something innocent and untouched by the blood and treachery that stained the world outside.

The next morning, he forced himself to eat, though every bite tasted like ash. Lila and Mei whispered amongst themselves, their efforts to be discreet futile in the small confines of his chambers. They fussed over him constantly, bringing teas and soups and pillows until he begged them to leave.

But when the sun began to set, painting the sky in streaks of crimson and gold, Jimin found his thoughts turning to Jungkook.

He would have to know.

And so when he could at last summon the strength to walk, he made his way to the infirmary. He bit his lip, pressing down the flutter in his chest, and pushed the door open.

It smelled faintly of herbs and smoke, a mix of calming lavender and bitter wormwood. The brazier was near death, and flickered restlessly. It was colder here than his own chambers without a hearth.

Jungkook sat on the edge of the bed, his head bowed and his shoulders hunched. His chest was bare save for the bandages wrapped tightly around his ribs and shoulder. Blood had seeped through in patches, dull brown now.

He looked tired. Bone-deep, soul-deep tired. Jimin felt it in the bond. Not just from the wounds that ached with every shallow breath, but from everything. The weight of the crown. The betrayals that he knew to expect but had carved up his trust regardless.

Jimin stepped in.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

The flatness of his tone sent a pang through Jimin’s chest, but he moved closer anyway. “How do you feel?”

“Sickness breeds in this room. It’s no place for an omega.”

“But I came to see you.”

Jungkook’s head lifted just enough for their eyes to meet. His gaze trailed down Jimin’s body and back up again. “You’ve seen me. Now you may leave.”

Jimin frowned. “Don’t speak to me like that. As if—as if I mean nothing—”

Jungkook flinched. His throat worked as he swallowed, eyes dropping. “I—I apologise.” Then he sighed. “My body will mend in time. There are other matters more urgent.”

“I know. I wanted to—I have something important to tell you.” Jimin blurted. “Believe me I wished I had the courage to say it before, and I’m sorry, I’m so sorry—”

Jungkook stared at him for a moment. “Come here.”

Jimin moved across the room and stopped just short of the alpha. The space between them was a chasm, small in distance but vast in weight. Without hesitation, Jungkook gripped his wrist and tugged Jimin into his lap. He leaned in, his nose grazing Jimin’s neck and drowning him in a quiet flood of cedar.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Jungkook’s lips murmured against his neck. Jimin shivered. “I already know.”

“You don’t know. You can’t have known, because it’s about my mother—”

“I know, Park Jimin. I know about your mother.”

The admission startled him. “You know?”

“Of course, I know. Did you think I wouldn’t?”

Jimin swallowed hard. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Jungkook leaned back, his hand resting at the curve of Jimin’s waist. “What would it have changed?” His words grew sharp, laced with bitterness. “Would it have stopped her? Or any of them? The seeds of this betrayal were planted months ago.”

“She’s still my mother—”

“And she sent men to kill me,” Jungkook bit out, his gaze hardening. “Did you come here to defend her? To plead for her innocence?”

“No,” Jimin said quickly. “I know she’s guilty. I know what she’s done. But I also know you. I know you’re better than this, better than any other man who would spill her blood without a second thought if they were in your position.”

Jungkook’s laugh was cold, humourless, a sound that seemed to echo in the small chamber. “Better? You think sparing a viper makes me noble?”

“No,” Jimin said. “But it makes you merciful. It makes you human. Please, Jungkook. Spare her. For me.”

Jungkook turned away, taking a long, shuddering breath. “She would see me dead. You know that.”

“I do,” Jimin whispered, his hands warm and soft as they cupped Jungkook’s face, gently turning him to meet his eyes. “But I can’t lose her. And I can’t lose you. Please, I’m begging you.”

Jungkook’s eyes narrowed. “Why should I show mercy to someone who showed me none?”

Jimin hesitated, his hands drifting to his abdomen almost unconsciously. His chest felt tight, constricted. “Because… because this isn’t just about her. It’s about us.”

Jungkook’s gaze dropped to Jimin’s hands, a brief shift in his expression catching the light. The silence deepened, and his eyes softened, the reticence in his face slipping just for an instant.

“Us?”

“I was going to tell you when things were calmer. But I don’t think we’ll ever have calm, not truly.” He inhaled deeply. “I’m carrying your child.”

Jungkook’s eyes searched Jimin’s. His hand reached out, shaking as he pressed against Jimin’s belly.

“Why tell me this now?”

“Because you need to know what you’ll destroy if you do this,” Jimin said, his voice steady despite the tears slipping down his cheeks. “I won’t beg for her life because she deserves it. I’m begging because I won’t ever be able to live with you if you take hers, Jungkook. Not even for our child.”

Jungkook closed his eyes, his hand falling away as he took a shaky breath. When he opened his eyes again, they had lost their piercing edge.

“Then she lives. But if she betrays me again, Jimin, if she so much as looks at me with treachery in her heart, I will show no mercy. Not even for you.”

Jimin pulled Jungkook close, his hands finding purchase at the alpha’s neck. “Thank you,” he breathed. “Thank you.”

31.

The throne room was a cathedral of power. Vaulted ceilings soared like the ribs of a colossal beast, and stone columns bore banners emblazoned with Jungkook's sigil.

A wolf with ruby eyes, its fangs bared in eternal defiance.

Torches burned along the walls, and incense curled around the sharp tang of freshly polished steel, weaving between the gathered lords and ladies who stood in a sea of silks and armoured shoulders. The room thrummed with anticipation, each breath, each whisper swallowed by the enormity of what was to come.

Jimin stood within the crowd, clad in robes of deep crimson that matched the wolf's eyes on the banners. His own circlet weighed heavily on his head.

All eyes darted between Jungkook and the towering iron seat before him.

The crown was forged from dark gold, studded with blood-red rubies that gleamed like freshly spilled wine. The High Septon held it aloft, his voice rising in the ancient language of kings and gods.

Jungkook knelt on the steps in full ceremonial robes. Sharp edges and harsh lines marked him as a man forged for battle. His head was bowed, the tendrils of his raven-black hair catching the faint glow of the torches. Jimin felt his chest constrict at the sight of him. He was not the picture of a noble, untarnished king, he was a warrior. A conqueror. The dark wolf who had clawed his way to the throne.

The High Septon's voice filled the hall.

"By the blood you have spilled and the oaths you have sworn, by the gods who bear witness and the people who kneel, I crown you, Jeon Jungkook, King of the Iron Highlands, Warden of the Vale, and Shield of the Realm."

The crown was lowered onto Jungkook's head, its jagged edges framing his face in shadows. He rose, and when he stood at his full height, the room seemed to tilt towards him. His gaze swept unencumbered over the gathered lords and ladies, until he found Jimin. Then, for the barest of moments, his eyes softened, a flicker of something raw breaking through the steel.

"Come to me."

The crowd parted like water as Jimin ascended the dais. When he reached the top, Jungkook extended his hand. Jimin placed his own within it.

"There was a time when I thought the past could define me, could bind me to the ashes of what I'd lost. But no longer. Today, I stand before you not as a man shaped by grief, but as a king who has chosen his future."

“You stand as my consort,” Jungkook said, his voice dropping low so that only Jimin could hear the next words. “But you’re more than that. You’re mine. You belong to me.”

Jungkook drew Jimin into his arms, his head lowering to the curve of Jimin’s neck, to the faded mark of his claim. His breath ghosted over the skin, his lips brushing the scarred flesh. Jimin swayed, his legs trembling beneath him. His stomach swooped in turns.

When Jungkook lifted his head, his eyes were sharp. He let his hand linger at Jimin’s waist, keeping him close as he turned to face the hall.

“Whatever my station, my title, my kingdom, it is Park Jimin’s as well. Let it be known across the realm—what I am, he is. What I claim, he claims. And any who would deny him deny me.”

A low murmur rolled through the hall like the first tremor of thunder.

The coronation bells tolled, and Jungkook stood for a fleeting moment, the crown upon his brow catching the light like a shard of the sun itself. Then he descended. Nobles bowed low as he passed. The faces were a blur to Jimin, but his thoughts were honed to a single unnerving truth. The throne they departed from was not just Jungkook’s.

It was theirs.

And it demanded, though Jimin didn’t yet know what it sought from him.

The grand doors groaned open. A sea of common folk waited in the sprawling courtyard, packed shoulder to shoulder, their breath clouding the cold morning air. The path leading to the gates had been swept clean. The palisade was lined with more banners, more garlands, more lanterns, all to celebrate the new reign.

Jungkook moved without hesitation, loping down the keep and crossing into the dense throng. The king’s guard flanked him. Jimin followed closely, his silks and gold seeming too fine for the dust and sweat of the gathered townsfolk. He saw their faces, some awash with awe, others pinched with fear. Children clung to their mothers, and men straightened their spines as though trying to appear braver than they felt.

Jungkook halted at the heart of the crowd. For a heartbeat, all fell silent, the world poised as if waiting for his decree. Then, slowly, he sank to one knee.

The gesture echoed outwards. Gasps scattered, followed by a ripple of motion as one by one, the townsfolk began to bow. It started with a young woman clutching a baby, her knees hitting the ground as tears streamed down her face. Then the butcher bowed, his apron stained with blood. Then the blacksmith. Then the stable boy. Then another, and another. Like a tide, they fell, their foreheads brushing the ground in submission to their king.

Jimin stood unmoving amidst the swell of reverence, his heart hammering as he watched the townsfolk fold like blades of grass. Fear ran like an undercurrent, but above it, fragile and trembling, there was a hope too frail to be called hope. With each head that bowed, it grew.

As Jungkook rose, the weight of their devotion seemed to settle on his shoulders like a mantle. He was a king who had carved his throne through conquest and blood but now carried their lives as if they had always been his to bear.

“You don’t kneel for me,” Jungkook’s voice rang deep and resonant, filling every corner of the square. “But for the promise of what can grow from this soil. What is broken can be mended. What is barren can bloom. Rise.”

His command was quiet. And the townsfolk obeyed, not with fear alone, but as though loyalty was a seed buried deep, yearning for the light to flower.

A child darted forward then. He was a boy no older than seven, his cheeks ruddy from the cold. He held out a sprig of wildflowers, clutched tight in his small hand. Jungkook knelt again, accepting the offering with a nod.

“Thank you.”

The child’s face lit up with a shy smile before he scampered back into the crowd.

Jungkook turned, his eyes locking with Jimin’s. In their depths was pride, perhaps, or the kind of challenge that demanded Jimin meet him as an equal. Jimin walked to him, his silks sweeping around him like embers stirred by the wind. He stood beside Jungkook, the contrast between them stark.

The warrior king and the delicate consort.

And as the townsfolk began to cheer, their voices swelling into a roar that echoed off the castle walls, Jimin felt it.

Power.

Not the heavy weight of a crown or the cold steel of a blade, but something more profound. A raw, swelling force rising from the ground itself, carried in the voices of the people who bent neither out of fear nor duty, but something closer to faith. In that moment, Jimin understood.

Jungkook’s battle had never been for the throne alone. It was for the pulse of the kingdom, for the marrow of its future, for the fragile, defiant hope that could endure even the cruelest of reigns.

32.

Piecing together a fallen kingdom not once but twice wasn't easy.

Jimin often thought of it as mending a tapestry shredded at the seams—every thread fraught with years of neglect, corruption, and rot.

He later learned that Jungkook had let it fester. He had watched the councilmen line their pockets, the queen's schemes grow bold, and the noble houses barter loyalty for power. He let them dig their own graves, allowed their greed and pride to reach a crescendo, all so he could strike them down in one fell swoop. At first, Jimin had thought it cruelty, but he'd learned better.

Jungkook had wanted to watch their corruption burn.

For the farmers whose hands were calloused by soil, for the fishermen who cast their nets into cruel, indifferent seas, for the traders and peasants whose lives hung by the thinnest of threads, tossed about on the whims of the court, forgotten in the noise of golden halls. The ones who, when they couldn't scrape together enough to pay their crippling taxes, were dragged to the northern wall, their names lost in the wind, where they stood shoulder to shoulder with him. With Jungkook.

But the rot wasn't skin-deep.

It had wound its way into the foundations of the kingdom, tangled so tightly that no blade could cut it clean. So every day, Jungkook waded into the muck to argue with ministers and unravel decades-old contracts designed to siphon wealth upwards. And every night, he poured over parchments until his eyes burned and exhaustion pulled at him.

But it still wasn't enough.

It was Jimin who had suggested attending the court sessions. Raised with royal grace and a tongue sharpened on years of court gossip, he'd known how to speak without shouting, and most importantly, how to salvage ties with the noble houses without grovelling. He had power among the court ladies too, a quiet, unseen kind of authority that moved through whispered conversations and shared glances. If the nobility ruled the throne, then their omegas ruled the nobility, and Jimin understood that better than anyone.

Despite the rift between them, Jungkook himself couldn't deny the queen and council had been right about one thing. Farmers and fishermen alone didn't fill the kingdom's coffers. It was the noble houses that provided the backbone of the court, and their loyalty—or lack thereof—could either stabilize a throne or topple it.

Jimin looked up from the letter he was drafting, his hand cramping slightly from the length of his topic. Jungkook stood across the room, his shoulders bowed as he leaned over a map, his finger tracing the borderlands. Even in moments like this, Jungkook's presence felt larger than life, but Jimin saw the weariness in the lines of his back, the way his head dipped when he thought no one was looking.

“You need to rest.”

Jungkook looked up. “Not yet. There’s still—”

“There’s always still,” Jimin interrupted gently. “And there always will be. That’s the nature of ruling.” He stood, crossing the room to pull Jungkook into bed with him. The heat of his skin was a reminder of just how human he was beneath the armour of his authority. “Tomorrow will come with all its burdens. But there’s one thing you’ll have less of when it does.”

Jungkook raised an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“Me,” Jimin replied, the smallest glint of humour in his eyes.

Jungkook’s breath escaped him in a slow exhale, his eyes dimming with something softer. “You’ve already given more than I deserve.”

“Maybe. But you’ll always have me. Whether you think you deserve it or not.”

Jungkook reached out, his hand brushing against Jimin’s cheek. “We’ll rebuild this kingdom,” he promised. “Together.”

Jimin believed him. After all, they were two heirs to one throne.

33.

Not long after, the queen died. Exile had been too great a wound to her pride, and her companion wrote that she had withered away in quiet despair.

When the raven arrived, Jimin broke the seal with trembling fingers. He read the letter, its words precise and clinical, before folding the parchment into his usual squares. Then, he poured tea and laughed with his court ladies.

Once alone, he heaved his swollen belly through the corridors to his chambers. The aches in his legs pulsed in rhythm with the weight in his chest, and a dull throb settled in his mind. As he closed the door behind him, he cracked. The tears began to fall, quietly at first, then harder, until they rained down without control. She was gone, and for all her flaws, all her distance, it felt like a piece of him had died too.

His mother, proud and cold and imperfect, had died a death that felt so pitiful, so small.

Jimin sank to the floor, clutching his knees to his chest as his pregnant belly made movement awkward and unwieldy. The memory of her distant smiles, her disapproving glances, the shadow of love she once offered, they all came back to him now. And with them came the words she so often repeated. *By starlight we endure.* His grief nearly crushed him at the thought of all she had endured. The light that once seemed so steady now felt so useless and empty.

He didn't hear the door open, but he felt the solid warmth of Jungkook's arms enveloping him from behind. The alpha didn't speak, didn't ask, just held him. Jimin buried his face against Jungkook's shoulder, and cried and cried a well of tears.

In that moment, all he could think of was how selfish he was to mourn when Jungkook had never even known his birth mother's face. The pang of guilt cut through the grief, sharp and sudden. *I'm sorry I miss her*, he wanted to say, but the words refused to climb out his throat.

Instead, he said, "That's the last of my family gone."

Jungkook kissed the top of his head.

"You have me."

34.

The trumpets blared in triumphant bursts and the crowd's cheers swelled with each victory. Swords rang against shields, bodies fell from horses. The tournament was a grand spectacle to mark the birth of Jimin's child. It played out in the courtyard with vigour, but inside, the world had narrowed down to a single point of agony.

The air was stifling, heavy with the scent of sweat, iron, and blood. It clung to Jimin like a second skin, mingling with the damp heat of his own body. His breaths came shallow and ragged, his fingers clawing weakly at the silk sheets beneath him. Every wave of pain felt like fire lancing through his core, pulling him closer to an edge he wasn't sure he could return from.

Dimly, he was aware of voices—urgent, harried, overlapping in their commands—but they blurred together, distant and meaningless. Only one voice cut through the haze.

"Jimin, stay with me." Jungkook said. His hand was iron around Jimin's, grounding him. "Keep your eyes open."

Jimin wanted to obey, to let Jungkook's words anchor him in the storm, but it was so hard. His body felt like it was being torn apart, each contraction stealing more of his strength. And then the words from the midwife shattered what little composure he had left.

"The baby is breech. We can try to turn the child, but... if we cannot... Your Majesty, we may lose them both."

Jimin's heart sank. The pain was no longer just physical, it was a deep, searing ache that burned in his chest. The baby. Their child. Jungkook's heir. He couldn't fail them both. His lips moved, though it took all his effort to form the words. "Save the baby—"

Jungkook's head snapped towards him, disbelief darkening his features. "What did you say?"

"Save... the baby," Jimin repeated, his voice cracking. He turned his face towards Jungkook, his vision swimming, but he could see the rage there. Denial burned bright in Jungkook's eyes. "It's our child, Jungkook. Your heir. Please."

"No." Jungkook leaned closer, his face just a breath away from Jimin. His grip on Jimin's hand tightened. It was fierce enough to hurt. "No, Jimin. You don't get to ask that of me."

Tears spilled down Jimin's cheeks, his breath hitching as another wave of agony wracked his body. He couldn't speak, couldn't fight Jungkook's refusal, but his eyes begged what his voice couldn't.

Jungkook's expression twisted, his brows furrowing as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "You think I care about an heir? About the throne? Damn it, Jimin, I care about *you*. Not the crown, not this child—*you.*" His voice broke. Jimin thought he saw the flicker of something raw in Jungkook's eyes. Fear, maybe. But it was so much more than fear. "Don't ask me to choose between you and some scrap of a future. I already have my answer."

Jimin's heart clenched, torn between the pain of his body and the raw devotion in Jungkook's voice. He wanted to argue, to make Jungkook understand, but the words wouldn't come. His body betrayed him, another contraction wrenching him back into silence.

The midwife spoke again, hesitant, her hands slick with blood as she worked. "Your Majesty, we must act quickly. The child is—"

"Save my mate," Jungkook snapped, cutting her off. "Do whatever it takes. I don't care—if you let him die, I swear to the gods, you'll follow him—"

Jimin barely heard the rest. His stare held Jungkook's face, every line etched with fury and desperation. His mate—his king—was shaking. Jungkook's fingers swept damp strands from Jimin's face, his touch so delicate it seemed as if he might shatter beneath the weight of his own fear.

"Stay with me," he whispered, the anger in his voice fading into something softer, almost pleading. "Don't you dare leave me, Jimin."

The world blurred. Time slipped through Jimin's grasp as the midwives danced frantically around him, their voices a chaotic hum. Pain ebbed and flowed, pulling him under like waves. Somewhere in the distance, he heard the high, piercing wail of a baby, but it felt like it belonged to a realm far removed from his own.

"A daughter, Your Majesty," the midwife said, cradling the newborn in her arms.

Jimin blinked, trying to focus, but his body felt too heavy, his limbs too weak. He turned his head, searching for his alpha. Jungkook hadn't even looked at the child. He only hovered over Jimin, his hand still gripping his as if letting go would mean losing him entirely.

"The baby... is she...?"

"She's fine," Jungkook said quickly, his eyes boring into Jimin's. "But you're not. Don't talk, just rest."

"But Jungkook," Jimin tried again, his words slurring. He wanted to ask about the child, to tell Jungkook to see her, hold her, but his body wouldn't let him. His eyelids drooped, heavy with exhaustion.

"Jimin," Jungkook murmured, cutting through the fog threatening to consume him. "Stay with me. I need you."

Jimin managed the faintest smile, his fingers twitching in Jungkook's grasp. "I'm here."

And then the darkness claimed him, swallowing him whole.

35.

Naively, he thought a child would be a blessing.

He had longed for the soft smiles and gentle affection he'd imagined, a family where laughter tinkled and chimed. His own memories of his parents as a toddler had been nothing but sweet indulgence and softly spoken words. He thought a child with Jungkook would bring them closer, that it would be their new beginning, a chance at something whole.

But as the phases of the moon waxed and waned, the tender haze of newborn bliss dissolved into uncertainty.

His body still ached. The midwives had warned a second birth might be beyond him.

That pronouncement had become another grief to carry.

Their daughter had eyes as wide and dark as Jungkook, and they stared up at him as if they could see everything and nothing. Jimin couldn't help but wonder if she recognised her father's absence in her own way. He tried to ignore the distance growing between them, tried to soothe his heart with the small comfort she gave him.

It hurt even more that after everything—after the pain, after the near loss of them both—Jungkook's heart seemed to be turning away from her. From him. From both of them.

But Jimin was braver now. And he would die before he let this chance at happiness slip through his fingers.

The frost in the room was born of more than the wintry wind outside. Their daughter was warm and heavy in Jimin's arms, her soft coos a fragile sound. He could see Jungkook across the room, standing by the window as if it might give him the answers he refused to find here. His broad shoulders were rigid, his head bowed, but Jimin knew better than to mistake stillness for calm.

"She's your daughter," Jimin said. He stepped into the room, his footsteps barely audible on the cold stone. "Ours."

Jungkook stiffened, his back still to them. "Don't say that to me as if it makes things simpler." He exhaled sharply through his nose. "It doesn't."

"She's a child, Alpha. A child who knows nothing. She is pure and good and untainted by our sins." He stopped a few paces away, his arms aching moreso with the burden of Jungkook's distance. "But she will know if you turn away."

Jungkook turned then. In his eyes was a fire tempered by the weight of too many past battles, a look that spoke of a man who had danced with death and feared it would always follow, even into his own bloodline. He glanced at the baby, just once, before his eyes darted back to Jimin, as if lingering on her would undo him.

“And what would you have me do, Jimin? Pretend that I don’t see the blood when I look at her? Pretend I don’t hear the screams?”

Yes,” Jimin said sharply, surprising even himself. “Pretend, if you must. Fight them, if you can. But don’t make her suffer for wrongs that were never hers to begin with.”

For a moment, Jungkook looked like the man Jimin had first met—a man who demanded loyalty and passion with equal ferocity, who had looked at Jimin and seen both an enemy and a saviour.

“You tried to kill me once. Not in the bathhouse, but with assassins.”

“I know,” Jimin admitted, his face tightening. “I’m sorry for what I did. Believe me, I’m sorry.”

“You must have known it wouldn’t work. That I’d be expecting you.”

“I wasn’t sure. I was—I was desperate. I was scared. But I knew you wouldn’t kill me for it.”

“And what gave you such faith in me?”

“Do you remember what you said to me in the throne room? You told me you wanted me as your mate. That you would bind me to you and breed yourself a new family.”

Jungkook scoffed. “I said it out of spite. To humiliate you. To wound your pride.”

“I know. But words spoken in anger can still carry truth. You want what was taken from you. A family. People you could love without fear. People who would love you back, just as fiercely. You may lie to yourself, but not to me.”

Jimin watched the tension ripple through Jungkook’s frame, his jaw tightening as though he could grind Jimin’s words into dust and scatter them to the wind. His gaze flicked to the child swaddled in Jimin’s arms. “And now you ask me to love this child.” His voice was rough with something akin to anguish. “To see past the blood that nearly took you from me.”

Jimin could feel the tears climb up his throat but he staunched them furiously. “She didn’t choose the circumstances of her birth. She didn’t choose my pain, or your fear. You’re no stranger to war. You’ve fought and won against impossible odds. Fight for her now. Please, fight.”

“I can’t look at her and not see you, pale and bleeding, slipping away in that bed—”

“She’s proof that I survived. She’s proof of us. And if you can’t see that yet, then I’ll keep bringing her to you until you do. Because I know the man who spared me once, the man who fought for his people and his throne, is not afraid of love.”

“I don’t *want* to love! Don’t you understand? I don’t want to love someone who almost killed you!”

“Please—” The ache in Jimin’s chest was so fierce, he could barely breathe. “I’m sorry for that. For all of it. I’m sorry for what everyone took from you, what I put you through. But I’m here now. And so is she. We’re still here, Alpha.”

“And now I’ve made you cry.”

“I’m selfish, Alpha. I want you. I want her. I want this family, please. We’ve both lost too much already. Don’t let us lose this too.”

Jungkook’s hands twitched at his sides. “Even if I could, what if I fail her?”

“You won’t, because I won’t let you.”

For a long moment, Jungkook was silent, his eyes dropping to the child again. Slowly, as though drawn by an invisible force, he reached out. His fingers brushed against the baby’s soft hair.

“I don’t know if I can ever forgive myself.”

“She’ll love you so much, so *so* much,” Jimin replied softly. “Just give her the chance to.”

“You think she won’t hate me. You think she won’t grow to despise the monster she’ll hear about in every whispered tale.”

“You’re not a monster—”

Their daughter cooed again, her small hand curling around Jungkook’s finger.

“I killed her family,” Jungkook admitted, splintering with heartbreak.

“And mine killed yours.”

“She’s so small.”

Jimin moved closer until their bodies nearly touched. “She looks like you.”

“I don’t know how to start.”

“You just have to hold her.”

Jungkook hesitated, but when Jimin gently extended the child toward him, he didn’t step back. Instead, he took her into his arms with the kind of care that belied his strength. She fit awkwardly against him at first, but as she let out a tiny sigh and nestled into his chest, something shifted.

Jungkook looked down at her, his expression unreadable. “She’s warm,” he murmured, almost to himself.

“She’s life,” Jimin said softly. “A new one. And she’s yours to protect, Alpha.”

Jimin watched the struggle play out in Jungkook's stiff posture and wary gaze, the walls he'd built holding firm even now. But there was a faint crack in the armour. A flare of unease that felt closer to guilt than anger. It wasn't much, but it was enough to make Jimin's chest flutter with the smallest glimmer of hope.

"I'll try," Jungkook finally said.

"That's all I ask."

36.

Firelight illuminated the sharp planes of Jungkook's body as he hovered over Jimin.

His crown was gone, his armour discarded. He had stripped off his titles, his burdens, here only as an alpha, a mate. Between them stretched bare skin, warm as ember, and the invisible tether of their bond.

Jimin lay beneath him, his body pliant, his chest rising and falling. His flushed skin gleamed with a faint sheen of sweat. His legs were parted, one hooked around Jungkook's waist, the other resting loosely against his hip.

Jungkook's hands were firm on Jimin's thighs, his calloused palms rough against pale flesh. He pressed his fingertips in, touching and dragging, coaxing sighs and soft whimpers from Jimin's lips.

"You're trembling already," Jungkook murmured. "What will you do when I take you apart completely?"

Jimin shivered, his arms rising to tangle in Jungkook's dark hair. "Why don't you find out?"

Jungkook leaned down to press his lips to the curve of Jimin's neck, right above the faded scar of his mating bite. A low growl rumbled in his chest as his teeth found the delicate skin there. It didn't wound, but it was enough to raise the length of Jimin's body into a graceful arc. Heat coiled low in his belly, spilling over in a rush of warmth that slicked his thighs. A breath escaped his throat, stuttering and jagged, like a half-forgotten melody.

Jungkook traced a path down Jimin's sides. One hand curled around Jimin's waist, anchoring him, while the other slipped between them, fingers dragging through the slick. The sound was wet, sinful, burning colour in Jimin's cheeks as his body jolted against the cresting tide of sensation.

"So willing for me," Jungkook said, his tongue darting out along Jimin's collarbone. "You test my patience, Omega."

Jimin whined, his hips bucking upwards. "Please—"

Jungkook shifted. The head of his cock dragged slowly along Jimin's slick entrance. Teasing. Unhurried. Their skin slid together, damp and scalding. He ground his hips, coating himself in Jimin's heady jasmine. Each deliberate stroke stretched the tension between them. It was a delicate balance, tender and tormenting in equal measure.

"Jungkook—"

The name broke from Jimin, part prayer, part plea. His fingers slid from Jungkook's shoulders to his nape, nails scraping the skin as he tried to pull him closer, deeper, anything to relieve the ache that burned low in his belly.

“Not yet. I want to feel you like this. Soft and wet, and desperate for me.”

Jimin whimpered, his thighs trembling as they spread wider, his heels digging into Jungkook’s hips. The slick pooling between them was obscene, each shift of Jungkook’s body drawing another needy sound from Jimin’s lips. His head dropped back onto the pillow, his eyes clenched shut. The peaks of his nipples were sharp against the curve of his skin. His stomach contracted. It drew into a tight coil as though some unseen force had wrapped itself around him, pulling every nerve, every thought. And there he waited, suspended precariously on the edge of surrender.

“Look at you,” Jungkook rasped. He fondled Jimin’s rim, dipping his finger in just briefly, before retreating again.

“Please,” Jimin gasped. “I can’t—”

“You can,” Jungkook cut him off. He shifted his weight again, his cock dragging lower, the head shoved into Jimin’s dripping hole just enough to make him cry out. “And you will.”

The gradual build was excruciating. Jungkook leaned down, his nose brushing against Jimin’s temple, the apple of Jimin’s cheek, their breaths mingling in the scant space between them. And then, with the slightest tilt of his hips, Jungkook pressed his cock in. The stretch was slow and intentional, the ache sweet and all-consuming. Jimin’s mouth fell open. His arms wound around Jungkook’s shoulders, holding him close as the world narrowed to this—this painstaking, shattering connection.

Jungkook’s large hand found his hip, his grip firm, possessive, adjusting the way Jimin’s body fit beneath him. Each push, each pull of Jungkook’s cock inside him and along his walls unravelled him thread by thread. Jimin whimpered, his hips instinctively arching up for more. He was filled entirely with want, with raw, aching need.

“You smell like jasmine after a storm,” Jungkook murmured, exhaling against Jimin’s ear. “You don’t know what that does to me.” His cedarwood flared, leaving Jimin dizzy and craving. “It makes me want to ruin you, to sink myself into every part of you until there’s nothing left of you but me.”

“Then ruin me—” Jimin’s eyes glazed as they met Jungkook’s. He wanted to be smothered, to smell and feel and taste nothing but Jungkook on his tongue. “Please. Don’t stop.”

Jimin felt Jungkook’s groan vibrate through his chest as if it were a part of him. The sound settled into his bones, between his muscle and vein. He watched as Jungkook straightened, bracing his weight on his arms, his fingers rough against Jimin’s skin. They slid over his nipples, trailing down to his navel, to the curve of his thigh, each touch pulling a shiver from him. The heat between his legs pulsed, desperate, and then Jungkook’s finger pressed inside him, alongside the weight of his cock.

Jimin cried out, his body opening up for Jungkook.

Jungkook’s gaze pinned him, eyes dark. He watched every flicker of emotion that danced across Jimin’s face, the parted lips, the crease between his brows, the quiet cries that spilled

from him. He added another finger, pushing Jimin's body to its limits. The air thickened with the mingling scent of jasmine and cedar. It swelled and pressed against their skin, a breathing thing, fragrant and fevered, as if it too sought to touch, to claim.

"More," Jimin whimpered, his thighs trembling around Jungkook's waist. "Please—I need —"

His nails dug deeper into Jungkook's shoulders, his insides twisting and churning as he adjusted to the fullness. Jungkook drove into him, the weight of his body pinning Jimin down as he pulled back only to thrust deeper, fuller, each time. His cock was hot and swollen, sliding through the mess of Jimin's slick, reaching the innermost part of him that made his vision spark. Every thrust sank to the hilt, his full, heavy balls smacking against the curve of Jimin's ass. A loud, broken moan tore from Jimin's lips as he struggled to contain the vastness of it, the stretch, the ache, all of it blurring into something dangerously close to bliss.

Jungkook swiped Jimin's slick from his thighs and brought his hand to his mouth. He licked his palm and between his fingers, shuddering as his cedar turned pungent. Without breaking his gaze, he smeared more of Jimin's slick over his own cock. He gave himself a few pumps, teeth gritting. Jimin's heart hammered in his chest, pulse wild, every nerve on the verge of combusting. Then Jungkook spat where his cock met Jimin's hole, fucking his spit and slick and cum into Jimin.

"You're mine," Jungkook growled. His hand slid to cup Jimin's jaw, angling it so their eyes met. "Every piece of you belongs to me."

"I'm yours."

Jungkook captured his mouth in a searing kiss. His hips rolled languidly, compelling Jimin into a rhythm that built into a tempest. Sweat gathered at Jungkook's brow, clinging to the furrows of his face, his skin warmed like the setting sun. A lone drop of it traced a path down his jaw, halting at the edge of Jimin's lips, the salt of it mingling with the kiss of their breath.

Jungkook fucked into him insistently, his body surging forward with a force so measured, so controlled, it stole Jimin's breath. Between them, something burned. It was slow and inevitable, crackling with the kind of tension that could no longer be contained. Jimin's breath hitched, a broken cry escaping him. Everything else in the world fell into shadow. The heat surrounding them pressed in, thick, unbearable, until there was nothing left but the suffocating weight of it, until they were both consumed, together, in that singular moment.

Jimin cried out as he came. His skin burned, muscles tight and trembling, the rush of pleasure overtaking him. His mind emptied, his body floated. Jungkook's cock throbbed inside him, each spurt of hot cum sending shudders through Jimin's core. He shuddered and keened, his lips parted and bitten red. Jungkook came so much Jimin felt the warmth of his seed gush down, seeping from the edges of his hole.

Jungkook slowed to shallow thrusts. His hips ground against Jimin's, as if carving himself into permanence. A rough growl tore from his throat as his body jerked once, sharp and desperate, before stilling completely. Then he collapsed into Jimin, his arms coiling around Jimin's as if the very idea of parting was an affront.

The room quietened to their laboured breaths and the steady crackle of fire.

Jungkook buried his face in Jimin's neck, panting, sweating. "No one touches us. Not the crown. Not the court. I'll keep them all away from you."

Jimin held him closer. "You can't protect me from everyone, Alpha."

"I don't care. I don't care what they all say." As their breaths slowed, Jungkook rolled onto his side, pulling Jimin into his arms. A slither of moonlight fell across Jimin's face and he caught a glimpse of Jungkook's eyes. They were soft, raw. Unguarded. But there was something in the way Jungkook looked at him that made his chest tighten. "She's enough. You're enough," he whispered. "I won't let the burden of succession force you into anything more."

37.

The grass was soft beneath Jimin's hands, still damp with dew that soaked into his robes. The castle loomed behind, its stone walls worn but enduring, much like the man who leaned beside him.

Jungkook sat with his back propped against an old oak tree. The dappled sunlight fell over his face. His breaths were slow, measured, though now and then, a tremor rippled through his chest.

Farther out, their daughter toddled through the meadow, her laughter ringing out like a bell. She stumbled over the hem of her dress but righted herself quickly. She babbled and blew air bubbles, her small hand flapping with all the enthusiasm of her young heart.

Jimin waved back, smiling despite the ache that had settled into his chest.

"You look at her like she's the only thing in the world."

"She is," Jimin replied, his gaze lingering on her, before it shifted back to Jungkook. "And you."

The corner of Jungkook's lips tugged up, though it faltered as he broke into a fit of hacking coughs.

Jimin's smile slowly faded. He had noticed the change in Jungkook of late, how his steps had slowed, how his once vibrant eyes now carried shadows. The war had taken its toll on both of them, but where Jimin bore invisible scars, Jungkook carried his in the quiet erosion of his strength. He had long since understood that no matter how much pain Jungkook carried, he would rather bear it in silence. And so these were worries that Jimin safely tucked away in the quiet corners of his own heart.

He turned away, his gaze drifting to their daughter now crouched in the grass, examining a cluster of flowers with solemn concentration. "Taehyung told me a story once," he said quietly. "About a prince and the woman he loved. How they fought for each other, defied everything, but no one remembers them now. Not really. Just whispers of a legend that might not even be real."

"Does it bother you? Being forgotten."

"I don't know. Maybe. Though what good is being remembered if our story becomes something that doesn't belong to us anymore?" He looked back at Jungkook then, and the sight of him still strong, yet so painfully fragile, made his chest tighten. "Maybe it doesn't matter. What matters is that we're here. That we lived it."

Jungkook tilted his head. "And does living it make you happy?"

"It does. Doesn't it for you?"

“Sometimes I’m not sure what happiness is supposed to feel like.”

The breath that Jimin drew was an unsteady, quivering thing. Too sharp at the edges, to full of itself, aching to spill over into something wetter and louder. “Maybe it feels like this. Small moments. Not perfect, but ours.”

Their daughter ran halfway up the meadow. She held up a handful of crushed flowers as if offering a prized bouquet. Jimin’s laugh snagged in his throat as he raised his hand to wave at her again.

“See?” he said, turning to Jungkook. “That’s enough for me. For us.”

Jungkook didn’t respond immediately. His eyes swept over Jimin and then drifted to the child in the distance. When he finally spoke, his voice was so faint Jimin almost didn’t catch it.

“For me too. As long as I always have you.”

Jimin reached out and clasped Jungkook’s hand. He thought of all the stories that had been forgotten. Perhaps theirs would join them, lost in the passage of time. But in this moment, sitting here in the sunlight, with his mate and their child’s laughter filling the air, he decided he didn’t care.

Some stories didn’t need to be remembered by others. They only needed to be lived.

End Notes

i forgot my thank you notes 🥹

to jira, i probably alarmed you with the messages i was sending through the mods lol. thank you really for letting me write dead dove. it was hard to choose from your prompts i kept vacillating between all three. in the end i just went with my gut and i hope this fic lives up to what you had in mind

thank you so much to cumrich (!!) for pulling this fic from its deathbed, it really meant the world that you'd beta for me

and thank you to the readers who made it to the end. this has been a wild ride of sleepless nights, frantic excitement and lots of fear and anticipation. i would love to hear your thoughts, what stood out or anything else you want to share 🫶🏻

❀ twitter @bumblebzzbee
❀ links to other stuff

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!